# North·West ROMANCES

STORIES OF THE WILDERNESS FRONTIER

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## SPOILERS OF PARADISE VALLEY

A STEAM-MADE TROPICAL OASIS HIDDEN IN THE ICE-BOUND WILDERNESS —A SAVAGE LOST RACE AND A WHITE-SKINNED, GOLDEN-HAIRED GIRL.

by ROGER DANIELS

## TUNDRA GOLD

by FRED NEBEL

## HOBNAIL JUSTICE

by CHAS. NELSON

## NO LAW BELOW ZERO

DEATH WAS MARKED FOR THE RED-COAT WHO TREKKED THE BLOOD-SPECKED MURDER TRAIL—BUT CORPORAL McREE WAS HARD TO KILL.

A COMPLETE NORTHLAND NOVELET BY

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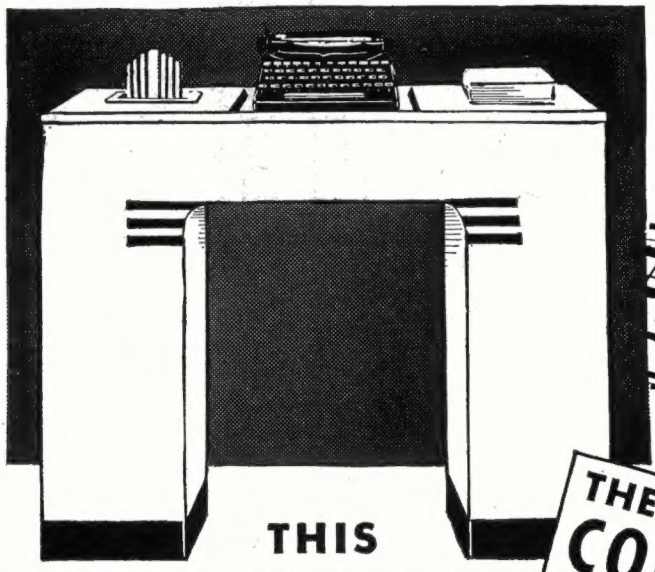

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Vol. XIII, No. 2. **FALL ISSUE, 1938** 20c per copy


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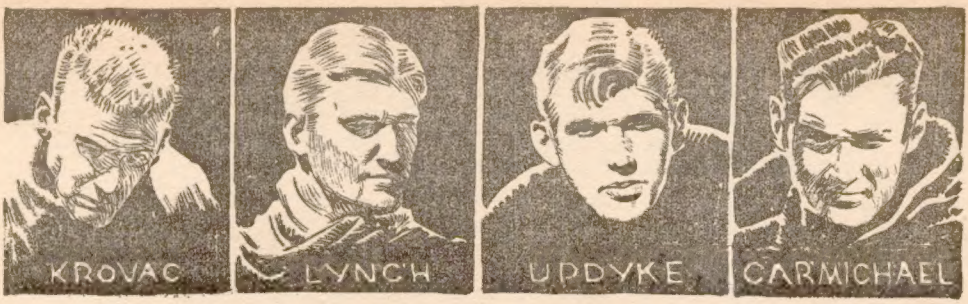


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# Tundra Gold

By FREDERICK L. NEBEL

**Gold stampede! The whisper came on blizzard wings—a challenge to stake life against yellow treasure. Cameo Dowd, card king, and Burke, the chechako, followed it to feud's end on a death-strewn trail.**

THE Tivoli, in Dyea, was in full blast. The last boat of the season, from Seattle, had docked that afternoon, and from it had disembarked hundreds of men with tons of luggage. The beach was strewn with tents and campfires and packs, and the lanes of the overnight metropolis were choked with milling men in mackinaws and muclucs. The honkatonks bleated and blared; and men drank and talked of the promised land in maudlin frenzy.

On the morrow they would be off. Chil-

koot had to be scaled, the chain of lakes to Laberge traversed before the freeze-up, else King Winter would hold them ice-bound till the spring. Many there were who sat and drank serene in the knowledge that they had plenty of money and had already hired packers to freight their luggage six hundred miles to Dawson. Many others—and these constituted the majority—had come to Dyea on a shoestring. Brave souls, brave spirits. But it takes more than a soul and a spirit to drive through a wilderness of snow and ice and low temperatures; and there were officials seeing to it that no man crossed the boundary unless he was equipped with sufficient grub and other equipage to last him through the winter.

Perhaps the most hopeless of the lot was Burke, the chechako. He stood with his hands thrust into the pockets of his mackinaw, one of a knot of men who looked on while others bet and won or lost at the whirring roulette wheel in the Tivoli. He was a burly young giant, gray-eyed, square-jawed, silent. In his jeans was the pitifully small capital of fifty dollars. Nothing else had Burke—neither dunnage nor friend.

HE watched a man win three times in a row on number twenty-two. When the man shifted to another number, Burke edged in and placed ten dollars on twenty-two. The wheel spun, and he lost. No change of expression crossed his face. He played twenty-two again and again lost. He paused, setting his lips a little tighter, his fingers toying with his remaining thirty dollars.

Then he took a long chance and placed ten dollars on twenty-two. In less time than it takes to tell it he found the keeper paying him three hundred and fifty dollars. That almost took his breath away, but he didn't show it. He lost three bets on twenty-two and then shifted to thirty-three. His first try here brought him three hundred and fifty dollars. His gray eyes steadied and he continued betting, but the wheel turned from him and after losing six times in a row, he stepped back.

Yet in place of his original fifty dollars he now had five hundred. A hunch told him to quit when he did. Five hundred dollars felt good in a man's pocket. It would not by any means get him to Dawson, but it would serve as a starter. Later he would come back and try his luck again.

Big, towering above many of the men, he elbowed his way through the crowd. A girl linked her arm in his and whispered of a drink and a dance, but Burke shook his head, disengaged her arm, and received a number of uncomplimentary remarks that rolled off him like water off a duck.

Out in the moonlit cold, out of the din and clamor and the smells of rank tobacco and rot-gut rum and steaming moosehide, he paused in a lee corner to light his pipe. Then he thrust his hands back into his pockets and strolled down the street. The night air was clear and cold and crisp, and mixed with his pipe-smoke, exhilarating. Out of the polar north the Aurora was shooting streamers of weird radiance that spun sibilantly among the stars.

Burke was a man addicted to solitary strolls. He liked to walk on and on, drinking in great draughts of the chill, clean air. He was born on the bleak shores of Lake Michigan, and having spent much of his time as a Great Lakes sailorman, was consequently used to the rigors of winter.

Presently he was by himself, tramping leisurely along in the pale gloom, his breath and pipe-smoke trailing behind him, the one hard to distinguish from the other. The path was beaten, but he saw no signs of life. Beyond a rise on his left he could see the glow of many campfires, but the sounds were muffled by distance.

Braced by the walk, he finally stopped, turned around and headed back. In the back of his head was the idea that he ought to return and try his luck again at the wheel. A wave of confidence was coursing through him, and he lengthened his strides.

He did not see a shadow detach itself from the deeper shadow of a clump of trees, as he swung by. The shadow sprang to life. A club traveled wickedly, landed on Burke's head with a dull thud. He slumped to his knees and then fell forward on his face, unconscious. Quick fingers rifled his pockets. Then the shadow straightened and sped off, and Burke lay as one dead.

TEN minutes later Stump McGonigle, slushing along from the direction of the town, came upon him. Stump had been

whistling a singsong chantey, but at sight of the lump on the trail he cut it short and bent over.

"Hey, you!" he called, prodding with his mittened hand. "Hey, you, what the devil now?—Um," he muttered, and dropped to one knee. "Guess he ain't drunk, either."

Stump saw the knitted toque lying in the snow, picked it up and tried to shove it back on the tousled head. In so doing he felt a large lump just above Burke's left ear.

"Um," he nodded. "This chum's been bushwhacked." He shook the unconscious man. "Hey, are you knocked out?" Receiving no reply, he said, "Well, I guess you are."

He stood up, a short, broad figure of a man, with a bushy beard touched up with snow crystals. He scratched his nose, looking around in the ghostly murk. Then he shrugged, bent down and heaved at the dead-weight figure.

"Gosh," he groaned. "Why in Helen Highwater do they make 'em so heavy?"

He tugged and heaved. Though short, he seemed possessed of an ox-like strength. He managed to wedge his shoulder in under his half-raised charge and stagger off with him. He continued along the dim path, then presently cut into one that diverged at right angles. A few minutes later he stopped before a tent surrounded by mounds of luggage. Dogs stirred and stretched in the gloom. Inside the tent there was a light, and a faint red glow rose from a tin chimney projecting from one side of the roof. He dropped the unconscious man and let out a vast breath.

"Is that you, Stump?" floated out a woman's voice.

"Yes, Miss Morgan. It's me—me and a poor critter I picked up down the trail a piece. Seems he was clouted on the knob."

There was a stir within, and then the flap parted and a girl was outlined in the lantern light, her head wreathed in a halo of golden hair.

"Oh, bring him in, Stump," she cried. "We must see what we can do."

"Y' bet," nodded Stump, and lugged Burke into the tent.

Thus they worked over him. The girl bathed his face and head with water, Stump uncorked a flask of brandy and pressed it to the man's lips.

Burke felt life returning. Lights whirled before his eyes, dazzling, and his ears pounded. Then the lights whirled slower, slower, and he saw that he was looking at a lantern. In the radius of the glow he saw a broad, bearded face, with a nose like a gnarled pine knot and wide, serious eyes.

He licked his lips and turned his head a trifle. Another face. Hair like spun-gold, cheeks touched to a rosy hue by fresh air, eyes round and violet-blue and wondering.

"WHAT happened?" he asked. "I was—"

"Bushwhacked," put in Stump. "Did you have any mazuma?"

"I—" Burke stopped short, felt through his pockets, then relaxed. "I had five hundred. It's been taken. I played the roulette wheel for a flurry. Had fifty and hit such a sudden streak of luck I had to go out and cool off." His lips set, and he looked toward the flap. "If I find the man who waylaid me—"

"No use worryin'," said Stump, "if you got no idea who did it. What you get for strollin' in the moonlight."

"I've got no idea," replied Burke. "Saw no one following me. Saw nothing. But I'd just like three minutes with the rat who did it." Lights rose in his gray eyes, scintillating. Then he shrugged. "Well, no matter. Thanks for taking care of me. I'm back where I started from. I'll get along." He buttoned his mackinaw.

"What do you mean—back where you started from?" asked the girl.

"Broke," he chuckled, bitterly then, "Well, it's all in the game. I'll walk back and—Well, thanks again for—"

"Wait," interrupted the girl. "Are you bound north?"

He looked at her, and the ghost of a grin came to his face. "I'm bound for nowhere just now," he replied. "I'm stagnant. But I have hopes of getting north—like a couple of thousand others now in Dyea."

The girl looked at Stump, who blinked and then looked innocently up at the canvas ceiling. Then she turned back to Burke.

"Are you willing to work?" she asked.

"I'll have to," he said.

"Well, I am leaving for Nugget City, on

the Stewart, tomorrow. I'm a chechako, like yourself. Stump—Mr. McGonigle—was here to meet me with the team. He is a sourdough. He needs a man to help with the freight. He's been looking for one."

"I'd jump at the chance," Burke assured her.

Stump said, "You look husky enough, m' friend. D' you know cold weather?"

"Plenty," nodded Burke. "And snow and dogs and snowshoes and river boats. I'm a Great Lakes man. Day I was born it was thirty below."

"Um," mused Stump. "Well, then you're on. Seventy-five dollars for the trip and found. Bring your things here, if you got any."

"I've just got a blanket and a few clothes and my old Winchester down at the saloon. I'll get them." He paused on the way out. "Oh, my name's Burke—Cliff Burke."

"Your boss is Miss Morgan," said Stump. "And just a minute. Crossin' the boundary, you got to say how you expect to live. We ain't gold-rushers. You got to say if you expect a job where you're goin', and show proof." He looked at the girl. "What'd you say, Miss Morgan?" he asked.

She leaned back, and then lantern glow shimmered on her sea of golden hair.

"Oh," she said, "we'll say that Mr. Burke is to be bartender in my Nugget City Palace."

Tramping back to town, Burke was mystified—and a little awed. She was the last person in the world he would have placed as a saloon owner.

## II

"YOU leavin'?" asked the bartender as he handed over Burke's rifle and small bundle of clothes.

"Yes. I'm taking a job as a freighter. Going in with the Morgan outfit."

A man leaning against the bar nearby stopped a drink half-way to his mouth and flung Burke a sidelong look. This man ran to height and beef—big and heavy and rock-like in build. He wore a bearskin cap, the ear-flaps turned up and tied, and a red-blocked mackinaw. His eyes were greenish, his stubble a muddy brown.

Burke had seen the man's sudden show of interest in the mirror back of the bar. He turned to face him, saying nothing, a lifted eyebrow indicated his question—"Well?"

The stranger turned back to his drink with a frown, gulped it down straight, then pushed his hands into his pockets and wandered off into the gambling room.

"Do you know him?" Burke asked the bartender.

"No. He came out of the north a week ago."

"I was robbed tonight," said Burke. "About two hours ago."

"He's been here all evenin'," observed the bartender.

Burke left, wondering why the green-eyed stranger had shown such sudden interest in him. He strode past the Tivoli as a man was being propelled into the street by the able foot of a bouncer who had learned his profession on the old Barbary Coast. Burke had seen a lot of this since his arrival, and did not stop to join the booing crowd that gathered. Men struck suddenly and for no great reason, in that country. Brawls became so common that they drew little attention. Hard, the country and its men—hard and ruthless.

Burke reached the camp and found Stump making a fire at one side of the tent.

"I always sleep out," he said. "You'll have to do the same. Tent's for Miss Morgan. You got a six-gun?"

"Only a rifle," said Burke, raising it.

"There's a extry belt and six-gun in that b x there. You best use it when we're on th prod—buckled outside your parka."

Burke was a little puzzled. That sounded as if something ill were in the wind. He said nothing, however, on that score. But, after stowing away his small lump of clothes and rifle, he remembered the saloon incident, and said:

"By the way, commander—"

"Stump will do," mumbled the sourdough through his chew.

"—Stump, then. Look here. When I got my things at that little saloon below the Tivoli, the barkeep asked me if I were leaving, and I said, yes—with the Morgan outfit."

Stump turned on him. "Why 'd you have to go do that? I should ha' told you, the less said the better."

Mystery here—mystery. It was only then that Burke wondered why the camp

was situated so far from the town. But he went on: "And when I said this, a man at the bar jerked his head toward me, as if interested—"

"What 'd he look like?" chopped off Stump, one fist doubling.

"Big, broad, heavy-set—brown beard. I thought his eyes looked green—"

"Cripes!" Stump punctuated this by cracking fist into palm. He pivoted swiftly, for all his hammered-down bulk, and stared into the gloom out of which Burke had come. Without moving, he asked, "Did he foller you?"

"Didn't see him."

Stump was breathing heavily, his breath swirling around his shaggy head in silver clouds. Then he swung about, strode to the tent.

"Miss Morgan, can I come in?" he asked.

He went in.

BURKE stood alone, his feet spread wide, hands in pockets, head lowered, eyes peering through the scrub timber. He had blundered, talked too much. Yet how could he have known? He told himself, if he had been less dumb he might have known.

Faintly he heard the voices of Stump and the girl—low, hurried, the words indistinguishable. Stump was talking most. His tone indicated he might be trying to drive home a point. Minutes dragged by. A wind blew in intermittent puffs, rattling the scrub timber. Powdery snow fell from the branches. The dogs stirred; one stretched and yawned, its tendons crackling like twigs underfoot. The Aurora flared, faded, flared again.

Stump came out. Beside him was the girl, buttoning a muskrat coat. Stump looked purposeful.

He said, "Come on, Cliff. We're mushin'."

"Tonight?"

Stump eyed him fixedly. "T'night."

Then he pointed to the big twelve-foot sledge, and directed Burke how to load, himself joining in. He went a little later to empty out the collapsible sheet-iron stove in the tent. He folded it and stowed it away on the sledge. Then Burke joined him to knock down the tent. They worked swiftly, with an economy of words, and toward the end both were perspiring freely.

The girl stood at one side, her face showing like a white cameo against the blur of fur hat and coat. Eight malemutes Stump routed out from holes they had burrowed in the snow. Quickly, deftly, he strung them out. One line ran directly from the sledge to the lead dog. Between the leader and the sledge the others were hitched to traces attached at intervals to the main line.

Burke was naturally curious because of this sudden departure under cover of darkness. No inkling of the reason was given him, and he did not ask.

Stump held out the belt and six-gun. "Better start wearin' these now, Cliff," he recommended.

Burke took the belt, strapped it outside his mackinaw, slid the gun in the holster, clipped down the flap.

"All ready," said Stump, and handed Burke the whip. "You take the gee-pole. I'll mush ahead. Don't use the whip on the leader. He knows his business and don't like to be told with a whip." He turned to the girl. "Ready, Miss Morgan?"

"Yes, Stump."

Stump took a fresh chew of tobacco, then slushed up along the team, shouting "Mush, m' huskies—mush, m' beauties!"

The team lined out. Burke steadied the sledge with his hand on the gee-pole that stuck out from the side. The girl was directly opposite, one the other side. The outfit moved off through the gloom, crunching through low, blanched brush, the runners scraping over dead twigs.

Thus Burke was off for the gold country, the country that made many men and broke the hearts and souls of more. Men came, hundreds, thousands, from the far reaches of two hemispheres. Men are like that. Send out the world that gold lies at the very pole, that it rims the ramparts of hell, that the way to it is beset by madness, disease and death. Do all this, and your man will leave home and fireside and chase the elusive rainbow.

Burke was like that. But a few hours back he had been almost broke. Then a whim of the wheel had dealt him five hundred dollars. Then a whim of the devil had dealt him a crack on the head and empty pockets again. Burke still ached to meet the man. Yet he realized it would have been futile to seek him in crowded, hectic Dyea. Forget it. And anyhow, if

it hadn't been for that crack on the head he would not be heading north now. Out of evil had come some good.

Stump, fast for a man of his squat bulk, led the way out of the scrub timber and on to a beaten trail. Behind, Dyea was marked by a faint glow in the darkness. Ahead, white hills and beyond them fantastic peaks of ice looking like a mirage under the fountains of weird light that sprayed up from the polar north. A wind was singing down from those far peaks which it would take days of travel to reach and pass. Cold the wind was; it stabbed at a man's face, billowed into his lungs, made his eye-balls ache.

Burke looked across to where the girl was plodding beside the sledge. He could see only the white tip of her nose and a bit of her cheek. She was pretty, he remembered. Now on the trail, her stride was resolute. She was not short, far from weak. She was all that was intrinsically feminine, and there was something capable about her, too. He mused it would take a lot to make her faint. He somehow did not like women who fainted at sight of a mouse.

AN hour passed. The way was deserted except for occasional camps stuck away in the lee of drifts or cut-banks. The outfit wound a serpentine way, snaking between snow-hills, skirting the rim of a field of boggy slush-ice.

Burke looked back once—caught a fleeting glimpse of a dark blur against the moonlit pallor of a snow ridge. Then it disappeared. Burke said nothing. Might be just a man on a legitimate mission of his own. But Burke kept looking back oftener. And, ten minutes later, he saw the blur again, nearer, following.

"Oh, Stump!" he called out.

Stump looked over his shoulder as he trudged, and Burke stopped. Then Stump turned and stood motionless, and the girl stopped, too. Burke slushed up to the old sourdough.

"I think someone's trailing us," he said. "Twice I've seen a man behind us. Last time he was nearer." He waved toward the country behind.

Stump's hand was resting on the flap of his holster. His eyes were narrowed.

"Prob'ly wait till we make camp," he said. A pause. Then, "Well, we'll keep mushin'." He unfastened the flap of his holster.

Burke did likewise. Then Stump spat tobacco juice and tramped up to the head of the team, starting it with a word to the leader. Burke trudged at the gee-pole, his eyes swinging intently from left to right and then back over his shoulder. They struck a narrow, winding trail where on their right rose a sheer bank of snow a dozen feet high, while on their left sprawled slush ice and black water.

A FEW minutes later the cold solitude was shattered by the bang of a rifle. The lead-dog screamed and twisted clear of the snow. Followed another bang, from a clump of trees on the top of the bank. The wheel-dog jerked to one side, bared its fangs and sent a wild cry into the night.

Burke whipped out his revolver and put a shot screaming toward the last gun-flash on the hill. But Stump yelled, "The team! The team!"

Panic took hold of the team. The lead-dog, hard hit, was tearing at the snow, leaping and lunging, yelping frantically. The wheeler tugged and heaved, and the other dogs, frightened by the actions of the mainstays, yowled and tugged at the traces.

"Hold 'em!" yelled Stump.

Burke gripped the sledge. So did the girl. Stump tried to get at the leader but the grizzled old veteran of trail and trace was crazed with pain and was running amuck. The whole team was afflicted with panic. Neither whip nor command stayed them. It was difficult for two men to handle eight panic-stricken malemutes.

The leader snapped at Stump, ripped the sleeve of his mackinaw. The wheeler yanked at the sledge violently. The leader leaped, spiraled in mid-air, and shot down toward the slush-ice. The others followed. Burke was a powerful man, yet eight dogs were far more powerful. The leader plunged into the slush, drawing the other dogs with him. The sledge skittered over the crust, heading for the black waters.

Burke saw the futility of trying to hold them. His brain flashed. He tugged at his knife, drew it, intending to slash away the traces and free the sledge so that it would not drag down the whole team. But he was a second too late. The sledge shot off with

the dogs, and Burke went with it, plunged down into the cold, slush-covered water.

His breath seemed wrenched from his body at contact with the water. The sledge plummeted beneath him. He struck out, his arms groping through the slush. It was like trying to swim through mud. He heard, vaguely, the girl's cry. His head came up, dripping, the water already turning to ice. He saw Stump's extended arm, reached for it, gripped the hand. His other hand was gripped by the girl. Together they hauled him out.

"The dogs!" he gulped.

"No use," chopped off Stump. "It must be deep. They ain't come up yet. Sled held 'em down. Run up and down, Cliff. Keep runnin' or you'll freeze to death."

Burke was a figure wrought in ice. He swung his arms as he ran up and down, and the ice that sheeted him crackled. Stump and the girl were frantically gathering sticks to make a fire.

"Keep runnin'!" warned Stump. "If you stop, you'll be dead in no time!"

Burke kept running. His backbone seemed frozen stiff. He could feel icicles hanging from his ears, his eyebrows, his chin, his nose. They clicked about his legs, clinging to the woolen trousers. Up and down he ran, up and down, his breath pumping from his chilled lungs. To stop would mean to die.

A fire was started. When it blazed up Burke wanted to hug it, to take it in his arms. Stump brought him into the warmth by degrees.

"Arms and legs first!" he said, and sent the girl away out of sight.

Off came Burke's moccasins and socks and frieze trousers, all caked with ice. Stump spread them close to the fire. He worked quickly, rubbing Burke's arms and legs. He took off his own mackinaw and wrapped it around Burke. He piled on fresh wood. The fire blazed and roared, and little by little Burke was moved nearer. His clothing steamed, dried rapidly, almost scorched.

An hour later he was dressed again, but still hugging the fire. That awful plunge had chilled him to the marrow. Stump called out to the girl, and she came out of the gloom, swinging her arms, grave and pale.

"How—how are you?" she asked Burke.

"Better," he said, and grinned; then frowned, looking at the black, slush-choked waters that had entombed the eight dogs. "Your whole outfit," he muttered.

Stump nodded. "Which means we don't get to the inside till the spring break-up."

"But we—*must*—this winter!" breathed the girl.

SHE squatted down between the men. Stump was chewing dismally. Burke had tied his pipe and pouch to the end of a stick and was holding them over the fire, to dry.

"Miss Morgan," ventured Stump. "Here we are, the three of us, stranded without an outfit. I vote we tell Cliff certain things. One for all, and all for one kinda, what I mean."

The girl looked at Burke, measured him with frank eyes, then nodded.

Stump went on, "Cliff, Miss Morgan is the daughter of the late Jim Morgan, a pioneer in the Yukon. He made a lot in the diggin's on Moosehide Creek. In his spare time, he was a gambler—not a perfessional, but he was a clever man at cards. A year ago he got into a game with Billy O'Hara, owner of the Nugget City Palace, and the game lasted fifty-two hours. It wound up by Jim winnin' the Nugget City Palace. He moved in, kicked out the tinhorns, and ran the squarest saloon in the country. Then he backed a mining syndicate that went on the rocks, and lost everything but the saloon. Three months ago he died with pneumonia, and left all he owned to his daughter Kate, who sits right here. I was his pardner when he hunted for gold. Miss Morgan is goin' north now to settle up—sell the saloon, if she can, and then go out.

"There's one other saloon in Nugget City owned by a gent named 'Cameo' Dowd. As far back as I can remember Dowd's tried to buy out Miss Morgan's dad. But they were enemies. It started when Jim was gold-huntin' and Dowd tried to frame him on the ownership of a claim. In his last will Jim writ the saloon could be sold to anybody but Cameo Dowd.

"That made Dowd sore. At Jim's death the saloon was closed down, but it's still stocked and worth, as it stands, a hundred thousand dollars. The green-eyed gent you saw is a critter called 'Butch' Dike, a

friend o' Dowd's. It's my bet that Dowd's aimin' to keep the Nugget City Palace closed as long as he can. It's my bet he sent Dike south to see Miss Morgan didn't get in. And it's my bet Dike fired them shots that wounded our two dogs, stampeded the others and sent our outfit down and out. That covers most all, Cliff," he concluded.

"Then," replied Burke, "since we're one for all and all for one, we've got to get north and turn the tables on this Cameo Dowd. You took me in when I was stranded. I'd like to lend a hand."

"We sure could use that hand," agreed Stump.

"Then let's all shake on it," smiled the girl. "One for all and all for one. From now on it's to be a three-corned partnership. I'm Kate. You're Stump. You're Cliff."

She held out her hands. Stump took one. Burke took the other.

"There's a camp up ahead where we can buy outfits, but no dogs," said Stump. "It'll be hard goin'. On the way down I stopped at Lake Bennett and told a carpenter there to have a boat ready by the time I came back. If we travel fast, maybe we can beat the freeze-up to Nugget City. The critter that fired that shot used his head. He figgered we couldn't fight back with the dogs stampedin'. He made a clean get-away."

"Maybe we'll meet him again," said Burke.

"I'd sure like to," replied Stump, "over a gun-sight."

## III

AT Sheep Camp they bought out a disheartened chechako for a song. Stump had sufficient dust with him to make the deal. They resold parts of it, at a profit, retaining four hundred pounds in grub, blankets, sleeping bags and cooking utensils—enough to last them two months on the trail. Since they were not going in as gold rushers, the law required no more. It was technically Kate Morgan's outfit. She was en route to take possession of a saloon left her by the late Jim Morgan. Stump was her guide, Burke his assistant; thus it was on the books.

The freight was carried forward in relays, a mile at a time. The girl worked too, slinging as much as fifty pounds on her back. It was slow, tedious, back-breaking toil. Yet they passed one man who was relaying an outfit of two thousand pounds in lots of eighty pounds each!

"You'll never get in this year, m' friend," said Stump.

"I know. But I'll get this stuff to Bennett in a month or two. Then I'll build a boat during the winter and go down north in the spring."

Burke marveled at the spirit of the man. Their own lot was an easy one compared with that man's. But not too easy. Day after day they toiled northward. They clawed their way over Chilkoot in the grip of a thirty below cold. Below and for miles beyond they saw glacial peaks, blue-white, forbidding.

Finally, Lake Bennett. There they found hundreds of men and camps, and the men were working furiously at the building of frail boats to float their dunnage down north. Everyone was in haste. Word had come in from the farther north that the freeze-up would come earlier than usual. A craft caught in the first ice would be doomed to remain there till the spring thaw. Brawls sprang up quickly on the busy shore. Men almost killed each other over possession of an oar or a boat-hook. It seemed the hundreds there were keyed up to the danger point, because all wanted to get to Dawson City before the big freeze, yet all knew that many would not succeed, and one envied the other.

"I'll find me that carpenter," said Stump, "and our boat. I paid him a hundred dollars deposit. The job costs five hundred."

"For a boat with oars!" echoed Burke, frowning.

"Yep. A thirty-foot boat," nodded Stump.

"I'll wait here," said Kate, sitting down on a mound of luggage. She was dead-tired, and circles were under her eyes.

As the two men strode off, Stump said, "Great gal, Cliff!"

"She certainly is," nodded Burke. "She's stood the gaff better than many a man. And she's less complaining than a good deal of men. She's—priceless!"

"We'll see no tin-horn flimflams her, Cliff."

"Tell the world!" Burke assured him. "I'm all for her."

"One for all," said Stump, "and all for one."

"You bet!"

They tramped up along the shore. Axes were ringing; saws were droning. Men were hard at work. They worked all day, and most of the night with the aid of a lantern. Stump cut in to a shack near which stood a couple of boats in the making. A man met him in the doorway.

"Where's that feller Anderson?" asked Stump.

The man took his pipe from his mouth. "Oh, you mean Sammy Anderson? Sammy went north two weeks ago."

"What!" exploded Stump.

"Yeah," nodded the man. "I bought him out. He met an old sourdough friend of his that got the gold-bug in Sammy's head so bad that Sammy took a boat he'd just finished and lit out."

Stump's face puffed up and reddened, and his big hands knotted. "The dirty little pup!" he snorted.

"'S matter?" asked the stranger.

Stump turned fiercely on him. "What's the matter! Why, dang me blue in the face, I contracted for a boat on the way to Dyea. I was goin' to carry my dogs and dunnage down the lakes to save time and if the freeze-up caught me, I was goin' to go on over the ice with the dogs. Now I lost my dogs and—Ding-bust that pie-faced pup's soul!"

"Ah, I remember," said the man. "Sammy told me about you. He left your hundred dollars with me. Just a minute." He went back into the cabin and came out with a small pouch, handed it to Stump. "I'd like to help you out with a boat, but I'm six behind already and—"

"Go build them!" snapped Stump, and strode off, boiling.

BURKE joined him. "Looks like we're stuck for good now, Stump, old timer."

"I dunno what to do," bit off Stump. "My brain's all fagged out of ideas. I was figgerin', I was *countin'*, on this boat. It was a long chance, but I figgered we might get way back country before the freeze-up. Yeah, we're stumped, Cliff. We ain't even got the dogs now. We could ha' gone in over the ice with them. It's pure hell!"

Kate received the news stoically. Only a faint tightening of the lips showed how the shock struck her. Stump was in pure agony.

"Don't take it so hard, Stump," she smiled bravely. "It wasn't your fault. We'll have to build our own boat and wait for the spring."

"And sit here while Cameo Dowd rakes in a fortune over the winter!" fumed Stump.

Kate shrugged. "I know, it's hard. I wanted awfully to get to Nugget City, and then return south in the spring. But we must take the worst with the best, Stump."

"We been gettin' mostly the worst," said Stump.

"Ever since I joined you," put in Burke. "I've been your hard luck card. I've been a hard luck number as far back as I can remember."

"Shucks, it ain't your fault, Cliff," came back Stump.

"Bah! I know it is!"

"Oh, Cliff, don't be like that," urged Kate, leaning forward. "They would have crossed us soon or later, anyhow."

Burke shrugged and turned away to gather wood for the evening fire. He felt pretty much sunk. Inwardly, he placed the guilt on himself. The casual remark of his to the bartender in the saloon in Dyea had sharpened the interest of the green-eyed man. He drew into himself, and he found a grudge growing within him—a grudge against the green-eyed man and all who were connected with him. They were plotting against Kate. In his quiet way he liked the girl. He liked to sit back beyond the rim of the firelight and watch her, watch the light flickering through her spun-gold hair, sparkling in her luminous eyes when she laughed.

AFTER supper, when she was mending a moccasin and Stump was repairing a snowshoe, he got up, buttoned his mackinaw, and with a brief word, went off on one of his solitary strolls. He wandered down among the beach-fires, saw men still at work with axe and saw. He paused before a tent where a game of faro was going on. He did not enter, merely looked in at the door.

He saw the green-eyed man in profile.

His hands knotted in his pocket. He stepped back, looked around, then walked over and took up a position beneath a stunted tree. He was, among other things, a patient man. Leaning there, he smoked his pipe, his hand cupped over the bowl to keep out the wind.

At the end of an hour he saw the green-eyed man—Butch Dike—come out of the tent. With him was another, smaller man. They pulled up the collars of their mackinaws and tramped off up the shore. Burke followed at an inconspicuous distance. They turned inland five minutes later and strode past a street of tents.

Burke trailed them to a low hill, waiting until they had topped it and disappeared. Then he hurried up, peered over the top and saw a campfire below and, dimly, a tent. He saw them stop by the tent, where another man rose to join them. After a moment the three entered the tent.

Burke cut off to the left and made for the camp by circuitous route, taking advantage of the bushes. He came up from the rear, and paused, lying still. He saw a sledge and dogs half-covered with snow.

He drew his revolver and edged his way closer. Ten feet from the entrance of the tent he stood up. His hand tightened over the butt of his gun. He bunched his muscles and leaped in long strides. He ripped aside the tent flap and thrust in.

The three men jerked back, and Dike clutched for his gun.

"No, you don't!" clipped Burke, quietly. "You, Dike, unbuckle that belt. Quick! And you two!" he flung at the others.

Motionless, he blocked the entrance, his gray eyes steady, watching every move.

"You don't know what you're doin'," argued Dike, sullenly.

"Never mind! Off with the belt!"

The three men gave up their weapons, and Burke threw belts and guns outside. He looked at the sheet-iron stove, glowing red, with a stack of wood alongside.

"Now," he said, "all of you take off your moccasins and socks."

"What the—" began Dike, his mouth falling open.

"You heard me! Take 'em off! I'm in a hurry. Snap to it! I'll blow apart the first rat moves out of turn!"

Dazed, bewildered, the men jerked at their moccasins, drew them off.

"Now your socks!" prompted Burke.

"But—but we'll freeze!" croaked one.

"Not if you stay in here," said Burke. "If you try to go out, yes. Exactly. Off with them!"

Dike grumbled with baffled rage. But his socks came off. Likewise, the other men's. Burke gathered them up, looked around to make sure there was no other footgear. There wasn't.

He addressed Dike simply. "The joke's on you. Nice trick you played when you shot our dogs. Well, I'm taking yours. I'll dump your dunnage at the other side of the hill. Maybe somebody'll come to help you in the morning. Poke out your head while I'm lining up the dogs and I'll knock it off."

"By cripes, guy!" snarled Dike. "I'll get you yet. And when I do—"

"Look me up in Nugget City. Good night."

Burke backed out, pulled shut the flap. He picked up their weapons, threw them along with their footgear on the sledge. Then he routed out the dogs, drove them into the traces, and started off.

"Damn your soul!" yelled Dike. "I—I'll kill you!"

"Whistle it!" sang back Burke, and drove the dogs over the hill.

AT the other side he dumped off the dunnage, the guns and the footgear. Then he cracked the whip and boomed down back off the shore camps, lashed the dogs on through the night and came tearing into camp as Stump was gloomily pitching sticks into the fire.

"Why—!" exclaimed Kate, eyes wide.

Stump squared around, his eyes narrowed. "Now what the—?"

Burke hauled the dogs to a standstill and dived for the dunnage. "Come on," he said. "Let's mush." He offered no further explanation.

"Say, look here," broke in Stump. "You gone dippy? Where'd you steal that team?"

"Didn't steal it. Took it from Dike and his two playmates."

"But they'll come after us!" cried Kate.

"Not in bare feet," chuckled Burke. "Took their socks. Come on, Stump! Fast, old timer! We'll travel all night!"

"Jumpin' jackrabbits!" exploded Stump. "You—you—"

"That grub-box, Stump!" cut in Burke. "Pile it here!"

Stump cut loose with a booming laugh, then leaped to load the sledge, chuckling in his beard.

Twenty minutes later the outfit pounded off into the night. Kate half-ran, half-rode on the rear of the runners, gripping the horizontal handle-bar and at the same time steering the sledge. Stump and Burke trotted on either side, the snow dust flying beneath their feet.

"Cliff," yelled Stump, "Dike'll try to kill you, sure as you're born!"

"Dike said the same thing," threw back Burke; and added, with a chuckle, "I'm worried stiff!"

"If not him, then Cameo Dowd—when Dowd gets wind of it."

"I'm worried stiffer!" laughed Burke, softly.

The camps of Bennett dropped behind. Ahead sprawled the long, lean reaches of the wilderness, ghostly under the frigid radiance of the Northern Lights. Beyond —days and weeks beyond—lay Nugget City and the notorious Cameo Dowd.

## IV

THINGS were tame in the Royal Flush Saloon and Dancehall in Nugget City. It was getting on toward eleven of a chill, drab morning, with the tardy sun still down behind the southern bulge of the earth. Most of last night's revelers were evidently still abed. Only one girl was afield in the wide, barn-like structure. She sat at a table tweaking the ear of a huge Swede who looked as if he'd just come in from the trail.

One old sourdough was placidly playing solitaire. No one was at the roulette wheel, but the keeper was idly and dreamily spinning the wheel and yawning between spins. A mulatto was learning the bars of a new song at the piano, plunking listlessly, one eye squinted against the rising smoke from a rag of a cigarette. Two men were standing at the bar fighting a hang-over with whisky straight, the argument being that the only way to kill the devil was with the devil.

At a table by a front window, alone, silent, erect in his chair, sat Cameo Dowd, having his first eye-opener and his first cigar of the day. Lean and tall was Dowd, olive-skinned, jet-eyed, smooth-shaven. An old scar high on his left cheek had, in healing, drawn up the eyebrow, slanting the eye, and leaving a vaguely satanic expression on his immobile face. He wore a light gray suit, a pearl-gray Stetson and a wing-collar. To all the women he had loved in his forty years he had presented rare cameos.

He looked out through the window, across the street at the Nugget City Palace, windows boarded, doors padlocked. For four months he had held full sway in Nugget City, supplying all its amusement and liquor, reaping a fortune. The freeze-up had not come too early, and the chechakos had poured in day after day. Things looked rosy for Cameo Dowd.

HE was smiling to himself confidently when a dog team trotted into his vision. His eyes squinted, then tightened. A black lead-dog, with streaks of white along his flank. He knew that team! Through the slightly misted window he saw three figures.

"Dike," he murmured, "and Kline and Cokely."

He stood up, tall and straight and wiry in his leanness. He strode for the door, pulled it open and put one foot out, smiling thinly.

And then his teeth snapped on his cigar, and his crooked left eye twitched. Three figures—but not the three he had thought. He buttoned his coat and stalked across the street. One of the figures turned, and he saw a girl—a beautiful, radiant girl with wisps of golden hair blowing from the hood of her parka. He slowed down, his shoulders squaring.

"Oh, hello there, Cameo," greeted Stump, shifting his chew. Dowd stopped, his lean cheeks drawn in, his mouth a hard slash.

"Where did you get that team?" he demanded curtly.

"Oh, we picked it up kind of," replied Stump innocently.

Behind Stump stood Burke, big and burly, his face wreathed in a young beard, his gray eyes regarding Dowd levelly, serenely.

"Where did you get *my* team?" snapped Dowd.

Burke said, "I helped myself to it down at Bennett."

Dowd shifted his rapier black look. "Who are *you?*"

"Burke."

"Oh, you did, did you?"

"Yep."

Dowd tilted his chin. "Stole it, eh?"

"Have it your way."

"Dump off your junk," went on Dowd. "I'll take my dogs."

"I didn't take 'em from you," said Burke. "Took 'em from a bird named Dike and two others."

"You turn them over." Dowd bit his lip in quick thought. "They were stolen from me a couple of months ago. They're prize dogs, and I want 'em."

"Prize dogs all right," agreed Burke, "but you're not going to get 'em."

Dowd's eyes glittered. He took three quick steps toward the sledge and kicked off a grub-box. Burke stepped over leisurely, grabbed his shoulder and spun him backward.

"Keep your hands off, mister," he said simply.

Dowd stood with shoulders thrown back, chin in the air, eyes narrowed murderously, his whole body tense.

"You give me those dogs!" he rasped. "They were stolen. If you bought or took them from the man who stole them, you're out of luck. They're still mine."

"Run along," recommended Burke quietly. "They're mine. Dike'll drift in here some day. Said he would. Said he would come on after me and do a little killing."

Dowd's crooked eye twitched faster, and his thin lips flattened back against his teeth. His right hand was playing with a button on his coat. Presently the top of his coat opened.

Stump was watching him. The old-timer had raised the flap on his holster and his fingers folded around the butt of his six-gun.

"I wouldn't go pullin' that derringer, Cameo," he drawled.

DOWD jerked his gaze to face Stump. He saw the short man's gun partly drawn.

"I ain't awful fast in the draw," went on Stump, "but I ain't awful slow, either."

Dowd lowered his hand, the fingers writhing. "I see," he snarled.

"Good you do," grinned Stump. "You'll be seein' a lot of us, too."

Dowd, always a good actor, relaxed, arched his eyebrows and chuckled liquidly in what seemed like high amusement. Then he put his cigar carefully, firmly, between his teeth, swiveled slowly and sauntered across the street. Pausing in the doorway of the Royal Flush, he half-turned, and again his head tilted back in a mocking chuckle. Then he entered, closing the door quietly.

"When Cameo's mildest," observed Stump, "he's worst."

Kate said, "Oh, Cliff, why did you get into an argument with him? Why didn't you give him the dogs if they're his?"

"I don't know," admitted Burke slowly. "I guess I didn't like the way he went about it."

Stump nodded vigorous agreement. "Y'bet. Cameo's trying to hand out the idea his team was stolen. Stolen my aunt's eyebrow! Butch Dike was always his right-hand man. My dogs wasn't so good, but they was dogs and they got me where I wanted to go. I sure hand it to Cliff for replacin' them dogs with Cameo's. This here team right now is worth five thousand dollars!"

"But you've caused hard feeling," said Kate.

"Shucks! Hard feelin's would ha' come anyhow." Stump turned, put hands on hips and looked at the Nugget City Palace. "There, Kate, m' gal, is your property. Billy O'Hara built it on a grand scale. Billy's over on the Yukon now. Owns another there. He was a great critter, and one o' your dad's best friends. A mighty good loser was Billy O'Hara." He looked down the street. "We can get the key from Ken Emmonds, who is a lawyer when he ain't off after gold. Come on."

They moved on, and Ken Emmonds, a large man with iron-gray hair, flannel-shirted, high-booted, greeted them expansively. Stump got the introductions over quickly, and Emmonds brought a bunch of keys from his safe.

"Here you are, Miss Morgan," he said. "They're yours. And there are some papers here you'd better sign. Stump and Cliff Burke can act as witnesses."

While the papers were signed, Emmonds went on: "Several offers have been made, Miss Morgan. Of course, Mr. Dowd up the street has been persistent, but—ahem—it seems your father and Mr. Dowd were not exactly friendly—and your father has stipulated that the saloon must not be sold to Mr. Dowd. But there are others. A Mr. Floyd, from Cassiar Bar, but he will go no higher than eighty-five thousand. A couple of partners from Dawson, too. Then, last week, old Billy O'Hara, the original owner, stopped here on his way down the Stewart. He'd like to buy it back again. He'll be here again shortly. And by the way, Miss Morgan, while you're here, we have a spare room at our house and I'm sure Mrs. Emmonds would be glad to have you."

Kate accepted graciously, and then lowered her voice. "But first, I'd like to visit —my father's—grave."

"Yes," nodded Emmonds gravely. "The cemetery is under two feet of snow, however, and the grave could not be located."

"But I'll just go there," Kate said.

Emmonds put on his mackinaw, and giving the keys to Stump, went off with Kate. Burke and Stump drove the team back of the saloon and put the dogs in the kennel-yard. Then they entered the building by a rear door, and toured the place from top to bottom. Dusty glasses still stood on the bar, and a couple of half-empty bottles. Stacks of chips were on the gambling tables. The store-room was crammed with all kinds of liqueurs and whiskies.

"We'll take possession of a room here, Cliff," said Stump, "till the place is sold. And meantime I got a claim down-river we ought to work a bit."

"I've got no right to work your claim, Stump," replied Burke.

"Who says you ain't?" demanded Stump. "We're pardners, and when you find a good claim you let me in on it, too." He added, as an after-thought, "Where'd I be—where'd Kate be—if you didn't help yourself to that team? It's your team, by rights, and it's worth five thousand. I'll buy it for five thousand in dust."

"No," said Burke. "It's our team. You know, one for all and all for one."

"There you are!" beamed Stump. "Like I said about my claim."

Burke grinned, laid his hand on the old-timer's shoulder. "I'm mighty glad I met you, Stump. It's a go."

NEXT day they loaded their sledge and went booming down the Stewart for Stump's claim. There was nothing sensational about Stump's claim. By the wood-burning method they managed to average fifty dollars a day. The snow was thawed with fires, and then striking bare earth, they thawed it with another fire, dug down till the earth became too hard and then built another fire—and so on, foot by foot, fire after fire, they bored into the earth.

A month later they plugged back into Nugget City with fifteen hundred dollars in dust. All the outsiders of the season were in, and the stragglers had finished dragging their outfits the last hundred miles over the ice. Hundreds of others had been caught in the freeze-up on the chain of lakes from Laberge to Linderman.

Kate met her two "pardners" with sparkling eyes and warm handshakes. She told of having received many offers for the saloon, but Emmonds had advised her to take not a cent less than a hundred thousand.

"He's suggested I wait until Billy O'Hara comes back from his mysterious trip down the Stewart," she told the two partners. "Mr. Dowd has paid me several visits and the last time he offered a hundred and ten thousand. But you know my father's will."

"I'll bet," said Stump, "Billy O'Hara will pay your price. I wonder what the devil he's doin' down the Stewart all this time?"

"I'll have to sell soon," Kate observed. "Most of my money is exhausted, and I've been Mrs. Emmond's guest just about long enough—longer than is polite in fact."

Burke and Stump left after a while to feed their dogs in the kennel back of the Nugget City Palace. Then Stump suggested a drink, and they crossed to Dowd's Royal Flush. It was three in the afternoon, and dusk was settling rapidly. The place was fairly crowded, and a couple of stud games were under way.

As they stepped up to the bar, a short, spare man was talking rapidly with Cameo Dowd, in a jocular vein. His toque was resting on one ear, and a cigar was bobbing up and down as he spoke. Dowd seemed

a bit annoyed, and as he espied the two partners, he tightened his jaw and narrowed his eyes. Stump edged over and hit the spare man a thundering crack on the back.

"Ugh!" he choked, almost losing his cigar; and then, "Well, Stump McGonigle, you old son of a Siwash!"

"Billy O'Hara, you old trail hound!" roared Stump, and introduced Burke.

"Say, Billy," said Stump, "I hear you're interested in the Nugget City Palace."

"I sure am, Stump. I'm going to buy it. I hear Jim Morgan's daughter's in town."

"Yep. Let me introduce you, Billy."

"Time enough, Stump—time enough. Wait till tomorrow. I've been living on beans and bacon for almost two months, and this is my night to get pie-eyed drunk. I was telling Cameo he's going to have me for a neighbor. Yes, sirree! Eh, Cameo?"

Dowd shrugged. "Looks that way, Billy," he said, and strolled off.

O'Hara prodded Stump in the ribs. "Listen, Stump. I want to have a little talk with you and"—he nodded toward Burke—"your young pardner. Come on."

HE turned, looked around and then led the way upstairs to a booth on the balcony overlooking the dancehall. Burke and Stump sat down and O'Hara drew shut all the curtains. He passed around cigars as he sat down and took off his toque. His merry blue eyes twinkled as he leaned forward.

"I've spent two months down the Stewart," he said, "and I'm going to let you boys in on something. I don't forget the time you tipped me off over on Tanana, Stump. One good turn deserves another. I'm rotten rich already, but gold always tugs at me, and I'm going to stock up enough so I won't go broke again. I've got a weakness for backing wildcat schemes, and you know I've made and lost three fortunes in my day.

"Well, as I said, I've been snooping around down the Stewart. I always had a hunch there was something doing on Crooked Knee Creek, and I aimed to start a rush, stake me a claim and then buy the Nugget City Palace. Business, see?" He drew a pouch from his pocket and poured out a handful of nuggets. "There's my sample."

Stump craned his neck. "You got them on Crooked Knee, Billy?"

"Yes, sirree! I've staked but I haven't filed yet. I'm letting half-a-dozen of my old friends in on it. Nils Jansen, Frank Tate, Herman Shultz, Ike Cosgrove, and you. I won't file till first thing tomorrow morning. I'm telling you like the rest. Rest up tonight, and sneak off at two in the morning. My claim's a mile up the creek. Two dead spruces, interlocked, mark it. It's going to be the biggest stampede of the year!"

"Billy," said Stump, "you're aces up!"

"Forget it, Stump. One good turn deserves another. Keep it under your hat. The news will spread when I file, but you'll have a six-hour start. Good luck, both o' you boys!"

O'Hara shook with them, slammed his toque on one ear and bobbed out in his jaunty, happy-go-lucky manner. Burke looked down from the balcony a few minutes later and saw the pioneer saloonman and all-around good-fellow laughing and joking while he placed bets at the roulette wheel.

"Wonder where Dike could ha' got stuck?" ventured Stump as they descended to the bar.

"I was looking forward to meeting him," chuckled Burke.

"If I know Dike, he ain't the critter'll come out in the open to meet you. But get him off your mind, Cliff. Somethin' tells me we're primed to make a fortune. Well, we ought to, if Bill's tip pans out."

"And if my hard-luck streak doesn't pop up."

Stump snorted. "Still harpin' on that? Shucks! Let's go over to our room and get a stampede outfit together."

They went out, crossed the street, unlocked the front door and entered. They climbed up to their room and Stump lit a lamp on the table. Burke closed the door.

"I'll start a fire," said Stump. "Little wood here, but we'll need more. We'll wolf some grub, take a nap and be fit to travel twelve hours."

"I'll get some more wood," replied Burke, and went downstairs.

Out in the yard he gathered an armful of kindling, re-entered the back door, bolted it, and felt his way through the gloom toward the stairs. He was half-way up

when a terrific explosion rocked the building and hurled him back down to the bottom, the wood clattering about him.

V

HE landed on his head, and the abrupt stop snapped his teeth together. He rolled over, stunned, millions of light-needles flashing and spinning before his eyes. Trip-hammers seemed to be pounding in his brain, and the shocks traveled the length of his spine.

Vaguely he remembered that something terrific, something like an earthquake, a volcanic upheaval, had occurred. He groped with his hands. He gripped something. It was the bottom of the balustrade. He dragged himself closer, wrapped his arms around the wooden post. Why was he so weak? Why did his muscles tighten and relax, quivering, beyond his control?

"Stump!" he choked. "Stump!"

He rocked, hugging the post. He tried to haul himself erect, toiled to his knees, as if a couple hundred pounds were on his back, holding him down. Sweat streamed down his face from the tremendous exertion, though deep within him he felt chilled.

"What?" clicked through his numbed brain. "What had happened?"

The sharp corners of the post dug into his arms. He heaved again, and the whole length of the balustrade creaked and swayed. Inch by inch he dragged his body up the post, and then stood on wobbling legs.

Smoke! Was that smoke in his nostrils?

"Stump!"

He reeled away from the post, brought up against the wall. He shook his head from side to side, ran a hand over his face. Damn those spinning, whirling lights before his eyes! His feet stumbled against the base of the stairs, and he fell forward. He clawed at the stairs. Step by step he toiled upward, his lungs pumping hard.

He reached the top and heaved up to his feet. He was steadier, the needle-pointed lights were vanishing. He swayed into billowing clouds of smoke. He saw tongues of flame licking the gloom ahead, heard a furious crackling sound.

Fire!

The smoke blinded him, gagged him. It was like a solid wall that held him back. He coughed and choked, crooked an arm across his face and lunged desperately through the suffocating clouds. A tongue of flame scorched his mackinaw; the heat of it hurled him backward against the wall.

"God . . . Stump!" he groaned.

His teeth set, his neck cords bulged. He bunched his muscles and with sudden abandon hurtled through the sheets of flame. The heat stabbed through him, made him grind his teeth. He struck a chair and tumbled over it.

The room was an inferno. The flames were shooting through the ceiling. Burke flung about furiously, hurled aside the table, came upon Stump huddled beneath the window. He fell upon the old-timer, wrapped his arms about him to shield him from the awful heat. Stump's beard was scorched to cinders; there was blood on his face. He was a limp, dead weight.

Burke wrenched a blanket from his pack in the corner. He wrapped it around his partner, stood up, with the old-timer draped across his shoulder. He squinted at the twisting flames, lowered his head and crashed out through the door. He slammed into the wall in the hall, turned and staggered for the stairway, flames licking at his heels.

He half-ran, half-stumbled down the staircase. His knees almost buckled as he reached the bottom. He plunged through the gloom of the bar, reached the front door, groped for the bolt, shot it back, yanked open the door and plunged out into the street and the cold and the milling crowd.

Billy O'Hara was the first to meet him.

"My God, Burke! What happened?"

"I don't just know," panted Burke. "Poor Stump! He's half-dead!"

Through the crowd came Kate and Ken Emmonds. The girl was wide-eyed, white-faced.

"Cliff!" she called.

"Kate!" he called back. "Stump—"

"My house!" broke in Emmonds. "Come on, Cliff!" He turned and flung up his hands. "Out of the way!" he yelled, boring into the throng. "Clear out!"

Burke lunged after him, with Kate at his side. They surged into Emmonds' cabin and his wife gasped. Burke laid his partner down gently on a couch.

"Where can I get a doctor?" he asked. "Stump needs a doctor."

"I'll get one," flung back Emmonds and dived out through the door.

But the doctor was already on the way, having picked up the news from the crowd of an injured man. Emmonds half-dragged him into the house. Burke stood aside, his face smeared with soot and grime, his eyes red-rimmed, his big chest heaving up and down, patches of the stubble on his face singed.

He looked at Kate, and he saw tears in her eyes. Her upper lip was quivering and she drew it under her teeth. She turned away, went over beside the doctor. Burke moved around, filling the room with his burliness, wanting to help Stump, yet knowing he could not. He felt miserable, the soul of him shocked and numbed to the core.

"Doc," he ventured clumsily, "what—what—?"

"He's badly stunned. See—his hair has been singed off! His face is gashed—his neck and chest and shoulders. Bits of metal in the wounds. A bad case. All of you clear out but— Will you help me, Ken?"

"Let me," urged Burke.

"No," said the doctor. "You look all in. Ken?"

"Sure thing, Doc. You'll have to clear out, you folks!"

Burke and Kate went out into the street.

NUGGET CITY was bathed in a red glow that pulsed in the Arctic sky. The Palace was a huge inferno. The black skeleton of it stood stark against the writhing sheets of flame. It roared and crackled mightily, and hundreds of men milled through the street, their faces limned in red.

Fortunately, the Palace stood alone, and a windless night saved nearby houses that otherwise would have gone up in flames. There was no saving it. In the mad hunt for gold, men did not stop to bother about forming fire brigades against such disasters. But a gang of men were on the roof of the Royal Flush, pouring buckets of water down its front to save it from the terrific heat.

"I'm sorry," said Burke to Kate, watching one side of the Palace crash in, while a fountain of sparks and cinders billowed into the sky.

"It—it's not your fault," she said. "Think of poor Stump."

"I am," he said, "I am. Of Stump and you. You're practically stranded, Kate."

"I know—I know," she nodded.

"You'll"— he drew a breath—"you'll need us. One for all—"

"Oh, Cliff, what are we going to do?" she cried; then she put up her chin. "I'll work. I'll do something. I'll have to."

"But there's nothing here for a woman, Kate—nothing but the dancehall."

She stiffened. "Not that—no—no—not that!"

"No," agreed Burke, bitterly; then, "Kate, this is sudden, but I've just realized—I love you. I mean it." He was clumsy but determined. "Crises make a man open his eyes. Kate, I want to marry you. I want to protect you. I'd give my life, such as it is, to have that right."

She turned her head away. He did not see how her lips compressed. "No—no!" she cried. "I can fight alone! I won't be a burden—to you!" She swung on him suddenly, her voice throbbing. "I don't mean to be harsh, Cliff. I know your love would be a great and steadfast one. But—but—"

"Kate," he said, softly, "do you love me?"

She looked at him with wide, moist eyes, her lips moving. Then she spun away, ran from him. Burke started after her, but dragged to a stop, hung his head. Running feet slowed down near him, and Billy O'Hara puffed to a stop.

"Cripes, Burke, I thought I could save something, but no chance," he said. "The place is double-distilled hell. *Look!*"

BURKE turned in time to see the roof cave in. Sparks sprayed upward, timbers crashed into the inferno with a rippling, thundering roar, and the crowd pressed backward. Walls followed roof, booming downward. Burning splinters spattered and hissed on the snow.

"I feel it, too," grated Billy O'Hara, "even though I don't own it. Jim Morgan—the squarest man I ever knew—won it from me in the biggest card game north of Chilkoot. But I built it, Burke. I saw it go up, bit by bit. Ain't it queer? I'm here

to see it go up in smoke." He shook his head wearily. Then, suddenly, "How's Stump?"

"Don't know. Doctor's with him. Maybe we can see now."

They moved over to the door, looked in. They went into the living-room, quietly. They saw the doctor bandaging the old-timer's head. His hands were already swathed in white. They were motioned away, and went out again. Billy O'Hara said he'd be back later, and strode off down the street.

Burke paced up and down in front of the cabin, impatient, anxious for his partner. Kate came back from her solitary walk, and stood beside him, watching the fire dwindle, a heap of smoldering embers where once had stood the Nugget City Palace. Burke turned and looked down at the grave white face. He took hold of her hand, pressed it.

"Kate . . ."

"Don't, Cliff—please, don't . . .!"

She withdrew, trembling.

The door opened and Emmonds said, "Stump wants to see you, Cliff."

Burke went in slowly, his face drawn. He saw the old-timer lying on the couch, all of his face but eyes and mouth in bandages. One of the bandaged hands beckoned weakly. Burke went over, dropped to his knees.

"Stump, old-timer . . ."

"Cliff, young-timer . . ." The cracked lips essayed a brave smile.

"What happened, Stump?"

"It was so sudden, Cliff. I was startin' a fire in the stove when—*bang!* Lucky I was over in the corner gettin' a chaw from my pack when it happened. The stove—it blew up!"

Burke's eyes widened. "Blew . . . up!"

Stump nodded. He saw Burke's jaw harden, the hint of cold steel that grew in the gray eyes that he had never seen otherwise than calm and gentle.

"Someone," breathed Burke huskily, "must have sneaked in while we were away and planted something in the stove!"

The steel grew in his eyes.

"Cliff," whispered Stump. "Don't forget Crooked Knee Creek. I'm sorry I can't go, young-timer. Think, Cliff. Don't lose your head. Think of Kate. She'll need you—now I'm out for a while."

"Cameo . . . Dowd!" muttered Burke.

"Cliff!" urged Stump. "Think! Kate! One for all, like Kate says, and all for one. Dowd can wait. But beat it for Crooked Knee at two. You can stake for me, too. Cliff . . ." His eyes closed and he relaxed, unable to even whisper.

THE doctor came over and gently but firmly moved Burke away. Kate had never seen the big man as he looked now. The color had fled from his face. It was cold with anger, the eyes were narrowed and flinty, the mouth set in a hard, tight line.

"Cliff, what on earth's the matter?" she asked.

He did not see her for a moment. Then he blinked, and some of the hardness vanished. "Oh, Kate," he mumbled, as if he were just aware of her presence. "I—I'll be back soon. Take care of yourself. Take care of Stump, little pardner."

"Where are you going?" she asked.

But he was already heading through the door, and did not stop. Outside he ran into Billy O'Hara.

"Here's your team and sledge, Burke," said Billy. "Nils Jansen got them out o' the kennel. How's Stump?"

"Pretty bad. Guess you can go in, though."

O'Hara entered and Burke drove the dogs around to the rear of the cabin and tied the leader to a tree. He struck a match and looked at his watch. It was almost eleven.

Grim—grimmer than he had ever been in his life—he rolled down the street and saw the last glowing coals of the razed Palace. Most of the crowd had dispersed, but a few groups still lingered, wagging their heads dolefully.

Burke turned to look at the Royal Flush, and his lips moved in a silent oath. His hands clenched in his pockets. As far back as he could remember nothing had stirred his blood as turbulently as what had happened during the past hours. He had never been a brawler. He was ordinarily a quiet, silent man.

But he wanted to have a talk with Cameo Dowd. There was no concrete proof that Dowd had had anything to do with the tragedy. Yet he had schemed and tried his hardest to prevent the re-opening of

the Palace. Burke believed him guilty. He wanted to walk in and break the saloonman with his hands. He was all primed, his blood was pitched high.

He set his jaw and strode toward the entrance. But he dragged to a stop. Stump had warned him to—think. Too much was at stake to run amuck. Kate was at stake. Stump was at stake. They had to live; there was no room in the country for empty pockets—not with eggs at twenty-five dollars a dozen and flour at three dollars a pound.

It took a tremendous effort of will to suppress his natural desire for a showdown. Personally, he would rather a showdown with Cameo Dowd just then than the richest claim in the hills. But there was Stump, laid up for God knew how long—and Kate, almost penniless as a result of the razed Palace and its stock of supplies. They had taken him in when he was broke. He must not fail them now. A thousand or two was only a drop in the bucket.

"I'll go in," he mused, "and kill some time, that's all."

But first he needed a stampede equipage. He strode down the street to the little trading store, and the manager expressed sympathy.

"Lucky they wa'n't much wind," he said.

Burke bought beans and flour and tea and a side of bacon, letting loose the hint that since he'd lost his room in the old Palace he'd have to camp out. He carried these down the street and loaded them on the sledge. Then he took his ax and crossed a snow dune to the timber, where he cut stakes for the claims he hoped to stake on Crooked Knee. These he packed on his sledge.

By this time it was midnight. Burke looked up at the bright stars; low, they were, and clear-cut in the polar cold. Still windless, too. A perfect night for fast travel down the Stewart. This—perhaps this was the eve of the greatest stampede in the country.

He strode out past the cabin. All was dark within. Poor old Stump! Kate—the priceless, brave girl, unwilling to make a burden of herself. Burke sighed. Leaving the cabin, he did not see a figure come slinking out of the timber where he had cut the stakes.

## VI

TWO hours to kill. . . .

Burke entered the Royal Flush thoroughly determined to mind his own business and ignore Cameo Dowd. Later—after the rush was over, after he had staked—he would attend to Dowd. But this was no time to let himself go when Stump's and—he believed—Kate's destiny rested in the hollow of his hand.

A couple of dozen men lined the bar, most of them pretty far under the weather. A group surrounded the faro table. Another group circled the roulette wheel. Dancing had stopped, and most of the tables were occupied by chechakos and sourdoughs and the spangled women.

Burke leaned against the bar and ordered a drink. A raw-boned, blue-eyed giant edged up beside him.

"Billy giff you dem huskies all right, Burke?" asked the man.

"Yes," nodded Burke. "Oh, you're Nils Jansen?"

"Yah. Ay had wan hal hof a time with dem huskies." He looked at his watch. "Say, you play poker, Burke? Ay bane t'ank ve haff time for little game." He winked.

"All right," agreed Burke. "Just a quiet little game. Sure."

They left the bar and found an empty table, sat down and broke open a fresh deck of cards. Two men came up and asked if they might join in. Both Burke and Jansen nodded, and the men took seats, introducing themselves. One was called Hinkle, the other Starr. They drew for the deal, and Hinkle, drawing high card, picked up the deck and shuffled deftly.

Cameo Dowd was standing at one end of the bar drinking with Tess Brennan, a tall, auburn-haired woman of uncommon poise. He jerked his head toward Burke and said, in a low voice, "There's one bird I'd like to break, Tess."

"Well"—she tapped the ash of her cigarette—"why don't you?"

Dowd looked her square in the eye, then smiled crookedly. She smiled back, lifting a knowing eyebrow.

Burke played amiably, but with no great interest. His mind was too much concerned with the coming stampede. However, after six fast hands, three of which

he won, he became aware of the fact that luck was with him, and his interest sharpened.

His deal came along, and he dealt swiftly. He picked up his hand, found two kings, two queens, and an ace. He discarded the queens and held the ace for a kicker. On the draw he pulled a king and an ace, which filled his hand to a full house.

Jansen, on his left, passed, laying down his cards. Starr, who had opened for five dollars, bet five and Hinkle paced him. Burke bumped it for five more, and Hinkle bumped it for another five. Burke jumped it for ten, Starr came along and Hinkle raised it for another ten. There was no stalling. It ended when Starr and Burke called and Hinkle laid down a quartette of deuces.

He grinned as he hauled in the pot. "Cards are big tonight, gents. I vote we call the ceiling the limit."

"The roof," said Starr.

"Hal," grinned Jansen. "Take off de roof."

Burke looked at the clock over the bar. Twelve-thirty. Jansen dealt. The hand passed swiftly. Starr won a small pot on two kings. Hinkle dealt, and Burke found himself with a handful of picture cards. He threw away the king, jack and ace and held on to a pair of queens. On the draw he got a two-spot and a pair of queens.

He sat pretty with four of a kind Jansen, who had opened, bet fifty dollars. Hinkle bet seventy-five. Starr covered that bet and Burke bet a hundred.

"Yumpin' yimminy!" laughed Jansen, and threw in a hundred and fifty dollars' worth of chips.

Hinkle grinned and pushed in two hundred. By this time the original half-dozen onlookers had grown to a couple of dozen, and among them was Cameo Dowd. The fast betting wound up when Jansen called, followed by Hinkle and Starr. Burke laid down his four queens, and raked in twelve hundred dollars.

"Funny," chuckled Starr, "how these small games wind up in big ones."

CAMEO DOWD pressed closer. "Understand the sky's the limit?" he droned.

"High and wide," nodded Hinkle.

"Mind if I join?"

The players looked at one another, and shrugged. Dowd took a seat facing Burke. Burke fixed him with his frank gray eyes. Dowd smirked unconcernedly, shuffled the cards with the lightning swiftness of a veteran.

Burke's blood was beginning to stir up again. He repressed himself with an effort. He wanted to curse Dowd, to have it out with him right then and there. But his head said no. Stump was depending on him to be the first, or one of the first, to stake on Crooked Knee. He must not fail his partner, who had never failed him.

He forced himself to keep his eyes off Dowd. He looked at no one. He leaned on elbows, his head bent forward. He dealt with his eyes on the stacks of chips that marked each player's seat. Since Cameo Dowd had joined more onlookers had gathered, for it was said that any time Dowd played poker big things happened.

Burke's luck stayed with him. In two stiff hands he beat Dowd and the two pots totaled eighteen hundred dollars. He was now thirty-five hundred to the good, but it was a quarter past one, and no matter how high his luck ran he knew he had to leave at two. He played a shrewd, canny game. He was not reckless. Bluffing was not one of his tactics, for he was not a hardened gambler.

At half-past one Jansen dropped out, and nobody took his place. Ten minutes later Starr and Hinkle, having had poor hands for the past hour, gave up and left.

Dowd looked at Burke. "You still staying?"

"For a while," replied Burke, staring at the table.

"All right, then. I vote that every pot must be opened by the dealer, no matter his hand. After that he can pass. One hundred iron men the ante."

"Suits me."

Dowd dealt and opened. Burke got a pair of jacks, discarded the others and drew mixed numbers. Both passed and the ante remained in the pot. It grew in size with the minutes. Then Burke got three of a kind—three jacks. On the draw he got another.

Dowd bet two hundred. Burke, for a teaser, raised it only twenty-five. Dowd bumped it for another hundred and then Burke came back to raise it two hundred.

They bet and raised rapidly, and at fifteen hundred Burke called.

Dowd laid down four queens and took the pot. When, two hands later, Burke had three kings and was prepared for some lively betting, Dowd passed promptly after the second bet. Burke continued to draw good hands, but in most cases Dowd paid to see after the first or second hand and laid down low cards, giving Burke the small pots. When the betting ran high, with Dowd evidently holding good cards, the saloonman eventually won.

Burke became uneasy. His money disappeared rapidly, until finally he was down to a thousand dollars. Once he glanced up at the clock. It was a quarter to two. In ten minutes he would have to leave. He had no complaint with the cards. He drew more good hands than Dowd, but he lost nevertheless, because Dowd only bet high when his hand was worth it.

AT ten to two Burke pulled three kings and got another on the draw. Dowd began betting fast, and in short time eight hundred dollars was in the pot and Dowd showed no signs of calling. Burke was becoming restless. Only a few minutes to go. He was on the point of throwing in two hundred dollars when—

"Just a minute," broke in Billy O'Hara.

The crowd looked up. Burke looked up. Dowd kept looking fixedly at his cards.

"I might be drunk," went on O'Hara, "but I ain't so drunk I can't see this man Burke is being done wrong. Don't nobody move! *You neither, Tess!*" he ripped out.

Tess Brennan had tried to melt back into the crowd.

Dowd's crooked left eye twitched under the shadow of his Stetson. He stood up, lean, wiry, dignified. He turned on O'Hara.

"You're drunk—and crazy," he said calmly.

"Drunk," agreed O'Hara, "but not crazy." He raise his hand. "I just saw the trick pulled on this last hand. Tess was standing behind Burke. She was playing with a cameo. On the back of that cameo is a mirror. She held it in the hollow of her hand so's it would be visible only to Cameo Dowd. He could see what cards Burke held."

An ominous grumble rose from the crowd. Dowd remained unperturbed.

"You were seeing things, Billy," he said nonchalantly. "Tess isn't wearing a cameo."

Everybody looked. She was not wearing a cameo. O'Hara blinked his blue eyes, and his jaw clamped.

"She ain't now, but she was! I saw it!"

"Nonsense, Billy!" chuckled Tess.

"Not nonsense, either!" shot back O'Hara. "You must have dropped it down your waist!"

Dowd darkened. "You're just drunk, Billy. Go sober up." He swung his eye about the crowd. "This is a frame-up, gentlemen. And if any man doubts my word, dares shove his hand in Miss Brennan's waist, he'll cross me."

Burke stood up, a dangerous pallor on his face. "Dowd," he said, "I don't believe Billy is crazy. I'll not rough-house the lady, but I believe Billy's right. I can tell better than anyone else by the way you bet. You bet as though you were sure when you had good cards. You dropped out when it seemed you were sure you didn't. You're a double-crossing skunk!"

Dowd smiled thinly, stepped back. "That remark calls for a fight, Burke. I'm going to beat you to a frazzle, with my hands. Five years ago I was Kid Dowd, the crack-ajack heavyweight of the Pacific Coast. Take off your coat."

Burke's heart leaped. His hands knotted. He wanted nothing more than to meet Dowd with bare hands and pound him to a pulp. He started to take off his coat. But his eyes swept up to the clock.

*Five to two!*

He saw Nils Jansen making quietly for the door.

A lump rose in his throat. His lips pursed. Stump! He couldn't forget Stump! And Kate! He needed money, lots of it—to take care of them. She would have to let him take care of her. He believed she loved him. Money—food—lodging throughout the winter—and more to take them out in the spring!

He turned away, hunching his shoulders. With eyes almost closed, with the blood pounding at his temples, with the derisive shouts of the mob ringing in his ears, he ran for the door, pulled it open and lunged out.

Down the street he ran—down to the cabin. Stumbling, half-blind with chagrin

and humiliation, he raced around to the rear. He brought up short, with a stifled cry.

*The team and sledge were gone!*

## VII

SWAYING, he stood there, alternate waves of heat and cold pumping through his body. Then he whirled, a groan in his throat, and broke into a trot. Without food, without dogs, with nothing but the gun at his hip, he raced out of town.

Dimly, on the trail ahead, which was lit by the writhing banners of the Northern lights, he saw three men running. Beyond them was a fourth. Passing the fourth, and driving a team, was the fifth.

Burke stretched his legs. His moccasins crunched on the packed snow. His exhaled breath flew behind him. He gained on the straggler, Herman Shultz, and swung by.

*"Himmel!"* yelled Shultz. "I thought you vass pass mitt der dogs!"

"Someone stole them!" shouted Burke.

*"Mein Gott!* Und I yelt, 'Hurrah for der Crooked Knee!"

Burke made no reply. He left Shultz behind, musing bitterly that Shultz had unwittingly let loose the secret. Down the frozen river he plugged, sweeping past Ike Cosgrove, Frank Tate and Nils Jansen. No words passed between the men. All energy must be conserved for the long run. It was every man for himself. All but Burke carried light stampede packs, strapped to which were the stakes they hoped to use.

Ahead was the speeding team, the man riding on the runners, grinding over the harsh crust, wheeling beneath the wide array of stars. Burke tore after him, but did not gain. At intervals the team disappeared behind curves in the shoreline, for the man was driving close to the shore.

The cold air poured into Burke's lungs like liquid ice. It made his nose ache, up between the eyebrows. It stung his throat, seemed to cut its way down into his lungs. Yet he began to perspire, beneath his heavy clothing. Little patches of ice, like thin isinglass, sheeted his face and crackled when he worked his jaws.

Faintly he could hear the pounding feet of the men he had left behind. Sometimes, clear on the motionless air, he heard the crack of the dog whip far ahead. The wall of the mottled forest along which he ran stood silent and without motion. Not a grain of snow fell from the branches, not a tree-top swayed. The night yawned vastly in a vacuum of silence, frozen-hearted, breathless. Once the river ice, beneath its two-foot crown of snow, snapped with a muffled, reverberating boom.

A man could not run all the time. Sometimes he had to walk. Dogs were used to trotting mile after mile—but not men. Hence the team and its driver disappeared in the night silence beyond, while Burke walked, then trotted, then walked again, with Nils Jansen a quarter of a mile behind and the rest pounding resolutely along in his wake.

Night swung by, the cold darkness fled slowly before the tardy streaks of a chill gray dawn. Somewhere down beyond the southern bulge of the earth was the sun, but not one solitary ray of her touched the leaden pall that was the Arctic sky. No clouds, no mists, no haze; only the twilight half-gloom of a twilight country.

At noon Burke dragged to a stop, stumbled to the shore, gathered twigs and made a fire. Only then did the sun show, a rayless disk revealed on the shaggy horizon for a few moments; then it descended again, and by half-past twelve the entire sky was once more a dome of dull lead, passionless as the dead earth that sprawled lean miles beneath it.

Nothing to eat had Burke, so he smoked his pipe by way of nourishment for nerves, if not stomach. When the fire was blazing, he took off his sweat-soaked duffel-socks and moccasins and held them on sticks over the fire to dry. Wet footgear is one of the most dangerous enemies of mankind in the high North. He emptied his last grains of gold-dust from a moosehide pouch and deposited them in a pocket. Then he stuffed snow into the pouch and held it over the fire to thaw. When it had turned to water he quenched his thirst.

When he took up the hard trail again, he looked back to see Nils Jansen again under way, no more than five hundred yards behind. Nils waved, half-challenge, half-cheer. Burke waved back and went trotting down the wilderness river, confidence coming with his second wind.

THE day dragged by, and darkness came between three and four, and the cold stars blinked in the frigid gloom. Burke did not stop. He had vowed to himself not to stop until the others did. He followed the river doggedly, and as he was trotting along the wooded shore he saw dimly a snowshoe rabbit flash into view. His gun came out and he fired. The rabbit died in mid-career, and Burke snatched it up and continued on his way.

At midnight he looked back to see a fire growing on the shore. That was probably Nils making a camp. Burke kept on for another mile, then stopped too and built a fire. He roasted the rabbit on a spit and ate sparingly. What remained he rolled up in a bandana, then spread a bed of boughs before the fire and drowsed.

Two hours later the fire dying, the increasing cold wakened him. He put on more wood, sat for half an hour smoking his pipe, then stamped out the red coals and proceeded on the river at a fast walk. Later he broke into an easy, swinging trot. Just before another dawn snow began falling, backed up by a sharp east wind that whimpered in the strong woods and sighed across the surface of the frozen river. The snow was harsh, each individual flake like a large grain of sand that rebounded when it struck.

It blurred the vision. It frosted on Burke's stubble, and the bitter cold of it darkened his lips and cheeks. Later, during a breathing spell, he cut off a lump of the frozen rabbit meat and stuffed it in against the warmth of his body. Then he plugged onward, and near noon, stopped but made no fire. His body warmth thawed the meat sufficiently to chew and digest.

During the afternoon the going was harder. He had no webs, and the fallen snow was slushing up around his legs. His muscles were aching, the tendons in thigh and calf were taut and seemed ready to snap. He felt it in his loins, too, and there were little nervous twitchings in his stomach muscles.

In his mind were Billy O'Hara's directions: the mouth of the creek, the site of Billy's claim marked by two dead spruces interlocked, a mile up the creek. Thoughts, too, of poor old Stump, swathed in bandages, depending on him to make good; and of Kate, smiling bravely through tear-dimmed eyes, refusing his aid because she was brave, yet needing it more than she realized. Or maybe she did realize it but the spirit of her rebelled.

These thoughts—these and the streak of the die-hard underlying his quiet exterior, drove Burke onward through the black night through which whined and whistled the wind-driven snow. Speed was out of the question now. He had to plow through snow almost knee-deep, and the vast exertion of it, hour after hour, mile after mile, yanked at his muscles, almost pulled the heart out of him. Yet he kept on, stopping neither for fire nor food. No need to stop for the latter, since he had no more.

It must have been midnight when he turned and trudged into the mouth of Crooked Knee Creek. He was coated from head to foot with snow and ice, and his clothing was stiff as a board. His face was a frozen mask, and his head swam, pounded dully, and his lungs pumped laboriously. His feet seemed booted with lead. Each step meant double effort; the effort of pulling up each foot perpendicularly and then swinging it forward, to sink knee deep in the snow and be hauled up again for another step.

The creek was narrow and crooked, walled on either side by twisted willows and stunted spruce and stretches of muskeg. His eyes peered keenly through frost-rimmed lids, searching for the two dead interlocked spruces. On he toiled, yard by yard, his feet dragging, his big frame heaving and rolling slowly, tiredly.

Out of the gloom rose a huge, broad figure, square in his path. Burke almost walked into it. He felt a prod in his stomach, and knew it was the muzzle of a revolver.

"Now, Burke, damn your soul, where do I stake?"

The voice was vaguely familiar. The wind flapped the man's parka hood. Dimly he saw the broad face, the bushy beard, the faint gleam of bared teeth, the clouds of steaming, exhaled breath smoking between them.

"So you came, Dike," he said simply.

THE wind whisked streamers of stringing snow about their heads.

"I said I would," rumbled Dike. "And if you don't lead me to it, I'll spill your

rotten blood all over the snow. A fine stunt you pulled at Bennett, eh? I'll stunt you, pup! I'll load your belly with lead, that's what!"

Burke licked his ice-caked lips. "My, but you're tough, Dike."

"I'm tough as they come, Burke."

"When you're holding a gun."

"Cut out the gas, guy! Where do I stake?"

"There are four men somewhere behind me. They know. Try asking them when they come."

Dike crouched, a snarl on his lips. "Don't be funny! So help me, Burke, I'll kill you if you don't speak and speak fast!" He reached out a hand and took Burke's revolver.

Burke swayed with anger, his eyes glittered in the murk.

"Now move," commanded Dike. "Lead me to it. My dogs are in the bush and I'll get the stakes."

Burke drew in a deep breath and started off. He bent his head and slushed forward. Hidden in the thickets were the team and sledge. Dike picked up the stakes, prodded Burke in the back with his gun and urged him forward.

Burke went, winding slowly through the willows, tramping across a field of choppy muskeg. Dimly he saw the two interlocked spruces.

"They mark Billy O'Hara's claim," he said.

"We gotta find his center stake," rumbled Dike. "See you move like I tell you. Here, carry these stakes."

Burke took the stakes, and they slushed up past the two spruces. Almost hidden by snow they found Billy O'Hara's center stake. Dike measured off from that and then stopped. He flung Burke an ax.

"Drive my center stake," he ordered.

Burke hefted the ax, a curl on his lip. But he nevertheless hammered down the center stake.

"Now the corner ones," added Dike. "And don't stall."

"There are two men in this country," said Burke, "that I'm going to kill or lay up for the rest of the year. You're one of them."

"Wind, guy, hot air! On your way! You're going to stake my claim and then I'm going to give you a half-hour headstart away from Nugget City or pot you in the back."

They trudged up along the stream, and Burke drove a corner stake. With Dike's gun at his back he went on to drive the others.

"Nice to have a guy working for me," Dike cackled.

Burke was driving the last stake on sharp, slippery incline. Dike was behind him, gloating.

"I'm going to take the team and sail back to Nugget City and be the first to file. When you get tired of wandering around the country you can just curl up and croak. See if I care. And if I see you once on the way back I'll kill you on sight. You pulled a fast one at Bennett, you young pup, but I'm laughing last."

With a final smash Burke drove the stake in. Then his foot slipped, it seemed almost on purpose. His body shot down the incline and took Dike with it. Together, clawing at each other, they crashed into blanched willows.

DIKE was already cursing a sizzling blue streak of baffled rage. Even as they crashed, even as their bodies were still in motion, Burke lashed out and drove a terrific blow flush into the bushy beard. Dike yelled and Burke hit him again, caught his gun arm and with no waste motion yanked it behind his back as he was rolling. The fingers spread, and the gun fell away.

Burke scooped it from the snow as it was sliding and rapped the barrel against Dike's head. The man groaned and covered his face, and then Burke was straddling him, with the muzzle jammed into Dike's throat.

"Not a move!" he warned, and took the gun which a short time back Dike had taken from his holster.

Then he stood up, shrugging off the snow.

"Up, Dike! Get up and from now on close your dirty jaw!"

Dike staggered to his feet, wiping blood from his face.

"You—you pup!" he snarled between breaths.

"Shut up, I said. Get moving. Head back for the team. I've staked my claim and now I'm going to stake for Stump. Move!"

The tables thus turned, he made Dike drive the other stakes. Up the stream they ran into Nils Jansen.

"Say, what's dis?" boomed Jansen.

"Dike," said Burke. "Bird tried to use my stakes and do a little claim jumping."

"Val," said Jansen. "Lat us hang de skunk. Vhen de odder boys stake ve'll hold us a meeting and find us a tree. Ay bane not hang a skunk in long time, by yimminy!"

"No," objected Burke. "I'm taking him back to Nugget City."

"Hal, Burke, vhy vaste time on a skunk?"

"No matter, Jansen. I've got reasons of my own for taking him back. See you later."

He prodded Dike and they slushed ahead. When they brought up by the team, Burke took a ten-foot length of babiche, looped it and swung the loop around Dike's neck. The other end he tied to the handle-bar of the sledge.

"Now we're going to Nugget City," he said. "We're going to travel fast and you're going to run with me. If you hang back, the noose is liable to tighten and give you throat trouble."

"What are you taking me to Nugget City for?" rumbled Dike.

"You're dumb, Dike, but don't act dumber than you are. On your toes. I'll use the snowshoes."

He took the whip, cracked it sharply and drove the team out of the thickets. Steadily they plowed down the creek and drove out on to the broad surface of the Stewart.

## VIII

THE big stampede, the real stampede, the mad, frenzied rush of a thousand-odd men had started.

Burke, returning to file his claim, driving the team steadily, forcing Dike to pace him, passed the long line of men on the waterway. The men saw Dike staggering along at the end of the babiche line, but they did not stop to ask questions. It was no time for asking questions, scarcely time at all to even stop and eat.

Downriver they swept, an endless string of trotting, walking, stumbling men under light stampede packs. The less sportsmanlike of the horde cursed when a faster man gained and passed. Burke saw two men suddenly stop, square off and pump lead into each other's body. Both went down, both dead, while the horde swept on, turning only to look at the toll of greed, one old-timer pausing long enough to make sure the men were dead.

There was one who, with a fierce oath of chagrin, stuck out a foot to trip another who was laboring by. The latter fell headlong, sat up and deliberately drew his gun. Another coming up from behind kicked the gun away and shouted, "Don't kill him, pard. 'Tain't worth it. Here, I'll help you up." With which he heaved up the fallen man, and both took up the trail.

Others there were, the weak, the aged, the men who had crawled from sickbeds at the cry of gold. These tottered and swayed, faces twisted in pain, lungs straining, muscles quaking. Some fell, crawled along on hands and knees, clawed at the crust with numbed fingers, watched with anguished eyes the legs of stronger men swing by, looked up to see their bobbing packs, yet rarely saw a back-turned face or felt a helping hand. Some cursed the cruelty of the stronger men. Others, the hardened old sourdoughs, merely rested and took it all with philosophic resignation, knowing that to the strong belong the spoils.

Thus the hard law of that hard country.

But none would turn back. Of such titanic magnetism is the lure of raw gold. Several times Burke offered to pile a winded man on his sledge and take him to Nugget City. But the reply was either a friendly negative or a blasphemous refusal.

So Burke gave it up and continued on his way, already having covered half the distance to Nugget City. The storm had stopped during the night. The temperature had dropped to forty below, and it was barbed with a lacerating wind out of the northwest. During a brief breathing spell Dike whined. He was not so blustering as when he had been top-dog, yet he had intermittent moments of vile abuse.

"Listen, Burke," he cried. "Let me go. I want to go back and stake. Maybe I'll have luck. I'll let you keep that claim."

"Oh," said Burke, mildly, "you'll *let* me. Thanks."

"I mean, Burke, I want to have another chance. I—"

"Put on the brakes, Dike. And don't whine.

You're going to Nugget City with me."

"Cripes, Burke, listen to reason. I don't want to go back. Lookit all them fellers going to stake. I still gotta chance to stake me a claim. I'm almost broke, Burke."

"What's the matter?" asked Burke. "Did Cameo Dowd strike you off his payroll?"

Dike's eyes widened. He turned away, looking at the stampeders as they trudged by. Gold! There might still be time to stake another claim, a legitimate claim. Gold! The greed and lust of the yellow dirt burned in his piggish eyes, and his teeth bit into his lip.

"Listen, Burke!" he panted. "Let me go! I ain't really the man you want. Dowd's the man. I'll tell you everything, Burke, only let me go and stake a claim. I'll tell everything, Burke. Dowd gave me the gate. I don't care about him. He—"

"Wait a minute," interrupted Burke. "You're not going to buy your freedom by squealing on Dowd. Just now I don't know which of you birds I want most. I'll see, though, when we get to Nugget City. Now shut up. I don't want to hear a thing. When we get to Nugget City you'll talk—*and you'll talk in Dowd's presence!*"

"I won't go!" roared Dike.

"Mush, huskies!" Burke yelled to the dogs.

The team lunged into action and Dike was almost yanked from his feet. He screamed hoarsely. "I'll kill you! I'll cut your lousy heart out! I'll—"

"Mush, mush!" boomed Burke, and cracked the whip in the air.

"Ugh!" choked Dike, reeling and plunging behind, his face red, his eyes popping from their sockets, his lips spitting abuse.

SO for hour after hour the outfit swept up the ice-locked waterway. A camp was made late at night, and Dike was securely bound. Before daybreak they were off again, Dike raging and ranting now that Nugget City was drawing nearer. To prevent him from unloosing the noose about his neck, Burke had tied his hands. He was thoroughly determined to make this a showdown, and since he had set his mind on it, he was going to make sure that nothing, nobody would change his purpose. It had taken him a long while to get really and wholeheartedly mad. And after the manner of quiet men once aroused, it would take a lot to even the score.

Presently he saw Nugget City from afar, a blot of civilization on the lee shore of the great wilderness river. He trotted his team leisurely into town. It was like a land forsaken. Almost every man in town had gone off on the stampede. A couple of women were afield, and a few old men shambling along with the aid of sticks.

Burke stopped at Ken Emmond's cabin. He grabbed Dike by the back of the neck and marched up to the door. He knocked and Mrs. Emmonds opened it.

"Well, Mr. Burke!" she exclaimed.

"How do you do, Mrs. Emmonds. May I come in?"

He stepped back and shoved Dike in before him.

Stump was lying on the cot, smoking his pipe, his face still in bandages.

"Cliff, young timer!"

"Hello, Stump! Wait till I tie this two-legged skunk to a chair."

He slammed Dike down not too gently and lashed him to the chair. Then he threw open his mackinaw, crossed the room, and knelt down.

"How are you, Stump, old timer?"

"Mad as a hornet, Cliff! I can't get up, Doc says. What happened?"

"Well, I staked," said Burke, and went on to tell about the stolen team and the fight with Dike.

Stump looked across the room. "Ah-r-r, you're a fine bum, Butch!" Then he turned back to his partner. "They been tellin' me, Cliff, you crawled out of a fight with Cameo Dowd. I didn't believe it."

"Yes, I crawled out," nodded Burke, "for a reason. But I'm going to drop in on him soon and take up the argument where we left off. Now I'll run down and file. Where's Kate?"

The door opened at that moment and Kate came in. Burke stood up.

"Cliff, you're back!" she cried.

"Back again," smiled Burke. "Congratulate me. I've staked for Stump and myself. Now I have a little business to attend to. When it's all over you and I are going to have a serious little talk, little pardner."

She lowered her eyes and looked away. Then she saw Dike, red-faced and scowling.

"Who is this man, Cliff?" she asked.

"Oh, that man," replied Burke. "That's the man who shot up Stump's team outside of Dyea. He just can't wait until he meets Cameo Dowd."

Dike muttered sullenly in his beard. Mrs. Emmonds asked Burke if he had seen her husband, who had gone off on the stampede also, but Burke hadn't.

"I'll be back shortly," he said. "Kate you just sit here and watch that Mr. Dike doesn't go out for a walk."

"Cliff," she smiled. "I've never seen you so facetious. What amuses you?"

"The forthcoming meeting," he replied, "between Mr. Dike and Mr. Cameo Dowd."

WITH that he went out and strode down the street to file his claim. Then he crossed to the Royal Flush and entered. The place was almost deserted. The two bartenders were drowsing behind the bar. Half a dozen girls were sitting at a table, lonesome and disconsolate. Burke leaned against the bar.

"Where's the crowd?" he asked.

One of the bartenders looked up. "Gold-huntin', if you must know. Oh-ho, you're the guy tried to get wise with Cameo!"

"Yes," nodded Burke. "I'm the guy crawled. Where's Cameo?"

"Off with his team to stake. Catch Cameo sittin' tight through a stampede. My advice to you, big boy, is move outta Nugget City before Cameo comes back. He might pick on you."

"Oh, he might," said Burke. "You couldn't say for sure, eh?"

"Cameo's got to be pretty mad to go botherin' about a tin-horn chechako. You want to buy a drink? If you don't, I don't feel like just gabbin' with your kind. Buy or go get out o' my sight."

Burke grinned. "I aim to make Cameo good and mad. And look here, you flat-faced squirt!"

With a sudden movement he reached over the bar, caught the bartender by the throat and hauled him clear over. Then picking up a soggy bar-rag he washed the man's face, turned him around and planted a foot firmly and forcefully against the seat of his pants. The man skidded over the floor and stopped head-on against a cuspidor. Burke brushed his hands together and looked at the other man.

"You want the same? No? Suits me. But listen, the two of you. I came north as peaceful a man as you'd want to find. But ever since I left Dyea I've been rubbed the wrong way. I'm getting sore. I never looked for trouble in my life, but I am now."

He walked behind the bar, picked up a piece of soap, wet it and stood before the long mirror. On this he scrawled:

AN OPEN LETTER TO CAMEO DOWD:
I herewith repeat my words of the other night, to wit: You are a damned double-crossing skunk. When you have rested thoroughly from your trek, let me know and I'll come in here to repeat the above a third time.

Affectionately yours,
CLIFF BURKE.

Fnished, he threw away the soap, went out in front of the bar and stood looking at his message with keen eyes. The girls had strolled over.

It was Tess Brennan who said, "You must be looking for trouble, kiddo."

"I certainly am, sister," he replied, and turning on his heel, strode out.

Back in Emmonds' cabin, he said, "Well, Dowd's out on the stampede, too."

Mrs. Emmonds and Kate were in the kitchen preparing supper. Stump was propped against a couple of pillows, with his gun in hand watching Butch Dike.

"What you figger on doin', Cliff?"

"Introducing one skunk to another. I don't want word to get out that I have Dike. Somebody's got to pay for the burning of the Palace. Somebody's *got* to pay. I'm mad, Stump. I never thought anybody could work me up this way!"

"Go easy, Cliff, pardner," warned Stump.

"Watch me!" clipped Burke, grimly.

## IX

NEXT day, about noon, the first of the stampeders came pounding in to file their claims. Those with dogteams came first. Among them was Cameo Dowd. Straight, stiff, sure of himself, he filed his claim while his Indian driver took care of the dogs.

Then Dowd stalked down the street and banged into his saloon. Nils Jansen and Ike Cosgrove were drinking at the bar.

"Letter for you, Cameo," grinned Cosgrove.

"Eh?" Cameo drew off his mittens.

Cosgrove waved a hand toward the mir-

ror. Cameo came closer, read the fighting words, and sucked in a thin breath. His hands clenched. His crooked left eye twitched.

"So!" he snarled. "The puppy's growling again. All right," he nodded, and spoke to the bartenders. "Leave that there, boys! I'll sleep until five. Then I'll come down and finish this wiseacre's goose."

During the afternoon more stampeders flooded in, and as they lined up at the bar and read the message on the glass, they poked one another in the ribs and licked their lips in anticipation of a lively evening. By four o'clock three hundred men crowded the big saloon.

No one cared about playing cards or trying the roulette wheel. No one cared about dancing. On everyone's lips were conjecturings relative to the impending crisis. Every table was taken, every chair. The bar was lined with men shoulder to shoulder. Many stood around the walls, waiting, and the word having traveled, many others drifted in until space was at a premium and the newcomers were forced to take to the balcony, where they leaned on the rail, smoking.

At five Cameo Dowd strolled from his room, looked over the assembled crowd with keen, appraising eyes and smiled to himself. He proceeded to the center of the barroom and climbed upon a table.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "you've all read the words written on the mirror. I've read 'em too. I'm here, this evening, to call the writer's bluff. I'll write an invitation to this Cliff Burke to come in and join us."

He stepped down, went to the bar, wrote out a brief note and gave it to one of his boys to deliver. A few minutes later the man returned.

"Burke says he'll be right over," was the reply. "He hopes he hasn't kept you waiting."

Dowd nodded and drew complacently on his cigar. He stood and drank and chatted idly with Tess Brennan. All eyes were riveted on the door.

Five minutes later it opened and Burke strolled in. He was smoking a pipe, and nodded genially to everyone. He spotted Dowd and saluted.

"Got your invitation, Dowd," he said. "How do you like the writing on the glass?"

Dowd tapped off the ash of his cigar, took another lazy puff, and dropped it carefully into a cuspidor.

"I'd like to hear you repeat it," he said, "a third time."

Burke said it as he strolled through the crowd. "You're a damned double-crossing skunk."

Dowd took off his hat and handed it to Tess Brennan. To the crowd he said, "Will you kindly step back? I'll need a little room." He sighed and removed his coat, folded it with meticulous care and laid it over Tess Brennan's extended arm. He unhooked his gold cuff links and rolled up his sleeves. His arms were corded and tough-looking.

"Ay take your coat, Burke," offered Nils Jansen.

Burke shrugged out of his mackinaw and Jansen caught it on the fly. He knocked out his pipe and thrust it into the Swede's hand. He looked around critically, addressed the crowd, "Move back a little more, folks. When I hit Cameo he's going to sail a bit."

Part of the crowd roared derisively.

"It's all right, folks," grinned Burke. "I'm glad to see Cameo's got a lot of friends. He'll need 'em." He swiveled, his eyes narrowing. "All right, Dowd."

DOWD shot out from the bar, fast and agile. Two lefts sank into Burke's middle, a right sizzled up and glanced wickedly off his jaw. Burke took it and snorted away the sting. He ripped in a short right that got tangled up in Cameo's guard. Dowd rapped him again, high on the cheek, and left a red welt. He was no taller than Burke, but his reach seemed longer, and he could stab accurately.

For three lively minutes Burke took a whale of a lot of punishment in the ribs and on the face. But months on the trail had hardened his body and padded it with good muscle, and he took the punishment without a whimper.

His first real blow was a short, trip-hammer right that banged its way into Dowd's chin and almost took his head off his shoulders.

"Yumpin' yimminy!" roared Jansen. "Dad vas dynamite—hal, yes!"

Dowd reeled away to recover. Burke went after him, hooking in right and left

and rocking Dowd's head from left to right. But Dowd was a boxer, and he hung on, tying up Burke while his reeling senses slowed down to normalcy.

"Leggo there, you bum!" someone yelled crazily.

"Close your yap!" cracked another voice.

Another brawl was on the verge of starting when a bottle broke over somebody's head.

Dowd was out of his trouble. He leaped back, took a blow on the jaw, but traveled with it and killed its sting. Then he stopped, danced, sparred, feinted and came in with a dream of an uppercut that caught Burke square and sent him skidding backwards.

"Knock him out, Cameo!"

Dowd sailed in, smashing rights and lefts into Burke's face, aiming each blow, making each blow felt. Burke covered up, hunched, stood his ground and then muscled Dowd backward. He opened up suddenly, buried a short jolt in Dowd's middle, took two rights on the jaw, shook them off, and hooked a left to Dowd's chin. Dowd felt this, and snorted. He sidestepped and speared Burke on the ear and followed with a blow on the back of Burke's neck. Burke lunged forward, groping, stopped against the bar and turned.

Dowd boomed in and with a long right to the jaw bent Burke backward over the edge of the bar. Four times he repeated the blow, until Burke, in a bad way, hurled away from the bar and carried Dowd with him. They broke in the center of the floor, and both missed rights to the head.

Burke uncorked a stiff left that Dowd tried to catch with his hand and ward off. But he missed and the fist banged terrifically between his eyes. It shocked his brain and he clinched, but Burke tore away and hit him while backing up, and Dowd spat out a tooth. His crooked left eye was twitching rapidly. This Burke was a hard nut to crack, he must have mused.

But he came in warily, deftly, and speared Burke with a long left to the cheek. Burke bobbed with the blow, wheeled his torso and came up under Dowd's guard, ripping a short jolt up to Dowd's chin. Dowd tried to dance away; he liked long-range work, but it appeared that Burke preferred infighting and short, chopping blows. He kept at Dowd, forcing the fight furiously, and blood flew from punch and counter-punch.

Both men were badly cut up, and until that moment the fight looked even. But Burke was fighting faster, and the yells of the crowd were rising. Men were stamping and clapping, and the whole building shook with the tumult.

Dowd tried every trick he knew to break the infighting. He clinched time and time again, but every time he broke away Burke was after him, close, chopping with both fists, pressing the fight faster and faster. He rattled Dowd's ribs with terrific body punches, he snapped his head back with blows so fast and short that few saw them.

Dowd's cheeks were puffing in and out, his teeth were clenched hard. But Burke gave no quarter. He bored in, he drove Dowd around in a circle, he hammered him tirelessly. With another of his short, bone-crushing blows that nobody saw because of its speed, he sent Dowd crashing to the floor.

Dowd swayed back and forth where he lay. Then he toiled up, crouched and sprang. Burke met him with a thundering right that hit Dowd's jaw in mid-career. Dowd pitched to the floor, clawed at the boards. He struggled up, got to his knees, sagged and then crumpled again, rolled over on his back.

TESS BRENNAN detached herself from the crowd and bent over him with a handkerchief. No one saw him reach into a pocket in her dress and take out a small derringer. Only Tess saw. She clutched at him, shaking her head. He flung her off with one arm. With the other he raised the derringer.

Nils Jansen's foot lashed out as the derringer spat. The bullet sang past Burke's head and buried itself in the ceiling. Immediately the crowd turned on Dowd. He lay back, bloody and beaten, cackling hysterically.

"Damn . . . all of . . . you!" he screeched insanely.

"Wait!" roared Burke, raising a scarred, bleeding hand, looking through bruised, discolored eye-lids.

He strode to the door, pulled it open and stepped back. In walked Butch Dike, his hands bound. Behind him came Kate

Morgan and Billy O'Hara and Ken Emmonds, the lawyer.

A murmur of consternation rose from the crowd. Burke hauled Dowd to his feet and rushed him across to a chair at a nearby table. Opposite Dowd he placed Butch Dike. The crowd circled, craning necks, elbowing one another.

Burke looked at Dowd. "Dike," he said through puffed lips, "says you set fire to the Palace."

The accusation was well-timed, the crowd gasped.

Dowd bared his teeth at Dike. "You lousy bum! I did it, eh? Why, damn your soul, it was your dumb head did it! Why should I set fire to it, when it was so near my own place it might have burnt me out. It was you! You hated Burke as bad as I do. You wanted to kill him. I hid you in town—"

"And said if I'd kill him you'd give me five thousand to clear out o' the country," snarled Dike.

"But did I tell you to plant a home-made bomb in the stove where their room was? What a blockhead you are! You near burnt down my place too."

"Ay bane got some rope," broke in Nils Jansen. "Who bane got a tree?"

"Use a rafter," suggested a sourdough.

"It was Dike blew the Palace up!" shouted Dowd.

Dike writhed in his chair. "You wanted Burke killed! You was going to see the gal got hers too! You hired me to go south and see she didn't get in to Nugget City! And when I got stranded at Bennett them pups Cokely and Kline got yeller and breezed. What about your crooked gambling? What about that lookin'-glass you get women to handle for you?"

"You dirty, rotten son-of-a-pup!" screamed Dowd, rising and clenching his fists.

Burke slammed him back into his chair. The crowd yelled for rope and a tree or a a convenient rafter.

"No!" shouted Burke. "You've all heard. These two birds were cheek and jowl. Dike burned down the Palace, but he was Dowd's man. He was indirectly the cause of Miss Morgan losing a hundred thousand dollars. I say this. Dowd signs over the Royal Flush as it is to Miss Morgan. He takes what else he has and gets out of the country. That," he swung on Dowd, pointing toward the ceiling, "or a necktie party."

Dowd licked his lips, red murder in his eyes, his fingers twitching.

"There's a lawyer here," added Burke. "with power of notary."

Dowd stood up, tightened his lips, drew in a slow breath. "All right. Get the papers."

"I have them," said Ken Emmonds.

When the papers were signed, Billy O'Hara stepped forward. "I aim," he said, "to buy the place from Miss Morgan."

"I'm Miss Morgan's agent," put in Emmonds. "Sold!"

An hour later Butch Dike crept out of town and struck for the western hills, under cover of darkness.

Next morning, before dawn, a sledge and a six-dog team trotted southward on the wilderness river. On the sledge rode Tess Brennan. At the gee-bar ran Cameo Dowd, the exile.

A COUPLE of days later Burke and Kate stood on a hill overlooking Nugget City. Far and wide about them stretched the wilderness. In the distance rose ice-fanged peaks, coldly blue in the frosty air of morning. The frozen waterway wound its lean miles bravely into the heart of the country beyond, and the keen wind clicked and murmured in the strong woods.

Burke put his arm around Kate's waist and drew her gently to his side. With his other arm he pointed down river.

"It won't be so awfully long, Kate darling. You won't miss me."

"Oh, yes, I will!"

"That's why I said that," he grinned.

She snuggled closer and pressed the hand that held her waist.

"Billy's showed me some more nuggets," he went on. "We'll go out in the spring, little pardner. I'll have lots of gold."

"Oh, forget about the gold, Cliff."

"Can't, Kate. Man should never marry a girl wealthier than himself.

"But where would I be if you hadn't forced that issue—if you hadn't fought Dowd and revealed his complicity? I owe everything to you."

"Now, now, pardner. Where'd I be if you hadn't hired me in Dyea?"

She slapped his hand. "Don't be like that."

He laughed softly and caught hold of the hand, turned to face her. "Well, anyhow, I'll be back when the missioner gets here from Dawson, darling. And by that time good old Stump will be able to hit the trail with me again, bless his hard-bitten hide. You know, I asked Stump if he'd stand up for me, but he said, though he wanted to, how could he when the doctor said he must lie down, the old humorist."

"Stump is priceless, and he must go out with us in the spring."

Burke nodded. "You bet. And then, later on, when we're all sitting before the grate in our house, I can point at Stump and tell our kids that once on a time. . . ."

"Don't you think it's a little early to be thinking of kids?" Kate asked him.

"A little," Burke admitted. They both laughed.

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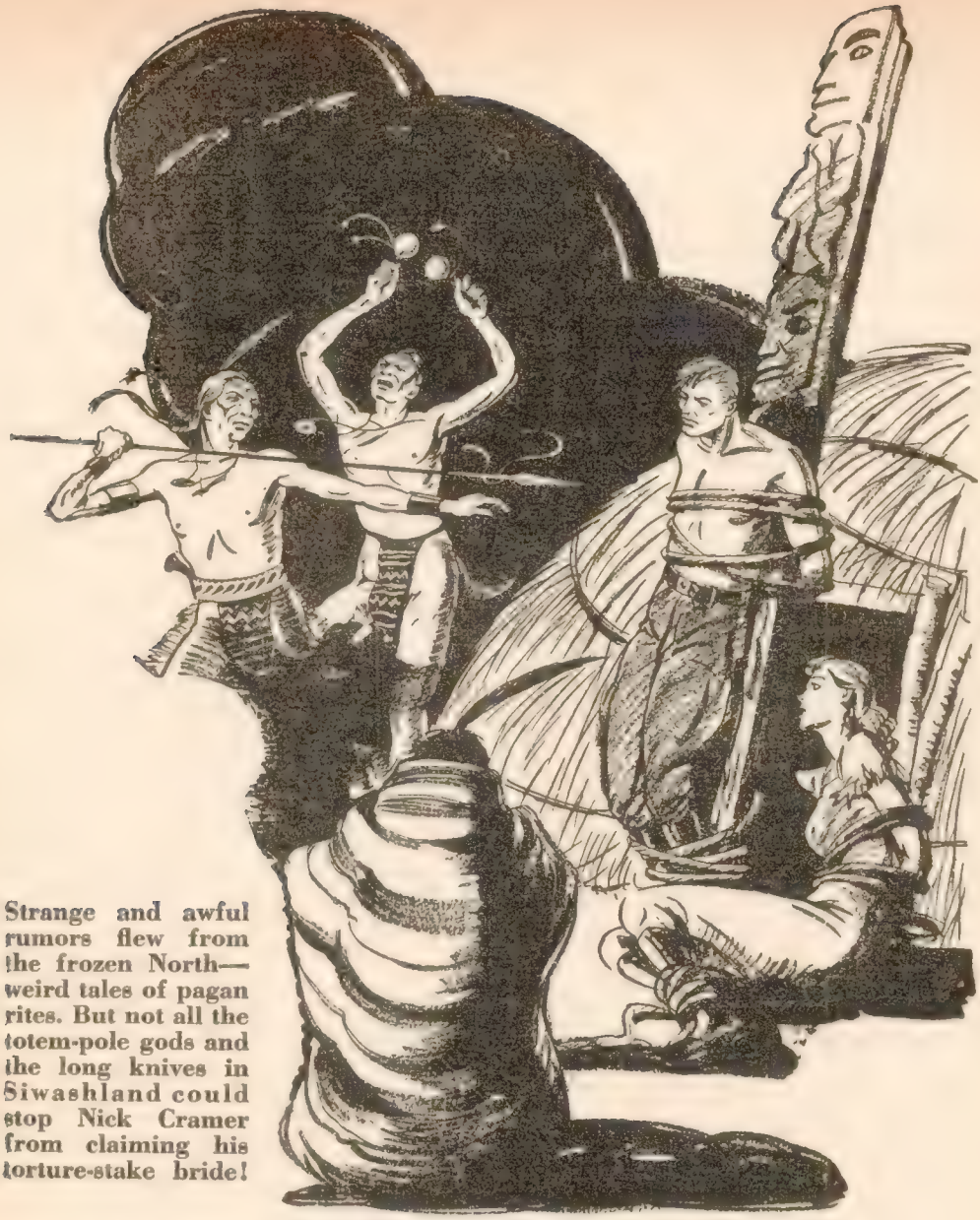

**Strange and awful rumors flew from the frozen North—weird tales of pagan rites. But not all the totem-pole gods and the long knives in Siwashland could stop Nick Cramer from claiming his torture-stake bride!**

# Blood Brother of the Snow-Gods

By SERGEANT DAN O'ROURKE

"SHEER off there! If you put a foot on my ship, I'll pitch you into the Gulf!"

Nick Cramer leaned his long body out over the *Sunset's* railing, gesturing threateningly at the long Alaskan canoe sliding along the schooner's counter.

A laugh answered. Wood thudded

against wood when the dugout bumped the fishing vessel's side. A moment later four thick fingers gripped the rail and a heavily set figure in streaming oilskins pulled itself into view.

"Can the dignity!" Amos Kasoon's deep voice sounded. "Don't think I'm comin' aboard this hooker just for the pleasure of yappin' with you, eh? Got a job for you, an' good pay in it, Cramer—"

"Keep your job and get to the devil off my ship," the other man came back. "I told you that before, Kasoon."

Cramer's lips were tight under the shelter of his oilskin sou'-wester. He doubled one fist and reached back a long arm. It was gripped from behind.

"For Pete's sake lay off that stuff!" "Fat" Noland's easy-going tones sounded in his partner's ears. "There's a U. S. Marshal in Akutat, an' we got all the trouble we can handle right now. Soft pedal, Nick; soft pedal. This half-breed is bad medicine."

Cramer swung around to glare at Noland. The little man was wearing his perpetual grim—his rounded face apparently innocent of guile, and set with two eyes of almost baby blue.

The *Sunset's* captain shook himself free of the detaining hand, but was conscious of the fact that what Noland said was the truth; there was trouble enough without making more.

He was suddenly aware of Kasoon's figure beside him, but his eyes went beyond the man to where the Alaskan mountain tops were crowned by fleecy mists; rifted now and then by rain squaals blowing in from the Pacific.

For a moment the youngster's eyes took in the little fishing town of Akutat, set on piling and built out over the gray water—at the meeting of mountain and sea. Then his gaze dropped once more to the white shape of the canoe on the sullen waters below. A gasp of astonishment came to his lips.

A girl in a yellow slicker was making her way forward along the canoe. She reached the ratlines, Kasoon's hand went out to her, and a moment later she had leaped lightly to the deck, to smile over at Cramer.

Some order was passed to the Siwash paddlers in the Klingat tongue, the long blades dipped, and the canoe sheered away from the schooner. Nick cursed softly under his breath when he wheeled about again and saw that a third visitor had come aboard behind Kasoon—a withered old Indian wrapped in a Chilcat blanket. He stood staring at the three, vainly trying to understand what it all meant.

ALONG the coast Nick Cramer had many friends and few enemies. He was quick to fight and quick to forget it. The man was lean and wiry from much hauling and running gear and halibut tackle. Even the skin on his close-cropped head was burned a rich brown from hatless days spent on the Pacific. Gray eyes, wide-placed, usually looked out on the world with a humorous twinkle in them. Now they were cold.

"Give me a hand to lower the small boat away," Cramer ordered Noland all at once. "Then you can put this lady and the other two ashore."

"Oh, no, no!" the girl appealed, coming forward a step. "I know this is most peculiar, Captain Cramer, but do please hear what Mr. Kasoon has to say. It's really most important to me."

"Sure, important to you, too," the big half-breed added. He laughed softly to himself when Nick, finding the girl's eyes still on him, hastily tugged down his slicker sleeves to hide the garish tattooing with which his arms were covered.

The tattooing had been a standing joke in Akutat until the day that Cramer decided he had had enough of such jocularity. Then his fists had impressed upon Kasoon that he had better find some other form of diversion.

"Look, Cramer," Kasoon went on after he had settled his grinning face. "You're broke, ain't you? Sure, I know it. The salmon fishing won't open for a month yet, so you'll stay broke. Also, I savvy the last payment on this here schooner is due next week; an' if you ain't got the money old 'Shylock' Jacobi will turn the two of youse loose on the beach. You'd look swell, walking down the rocks to San Francisco!"

"That's enough! By Jupiter, Kasoon—"

Cramer's hands shot out with the words, fastening on the other man's slippery oilskins. The *Sunset's* owner lunged forward, jarring Kasoon off his balance and

crowding him against the vessel's rail. There came the thudding of rubber boots on the wet deck, the rustling of oilskins, broken all at once by the girl's cry.

Cramer became aware of slim hands gripping his own, and an appealing white face turned up to him. His hands fell away, and the other man speedily moved back from the rail.

"You'll do this for me, won't you? Please! Please!" the girl implored.

The muscles on Cramer's neck was still pulsing with resentment, and he still glared at Kasoon's high-cheeked, mahogany colored face, across which an old knife scar ran from ear to lip. But before he had time to do what he intended, Noland sent a kick to one ankle that caused Nick to forget it.

He whirled about, a hot oath on his lips. But Fat's head was already disappearing down the companionway, and the girl's eyes were on him. He checked the words in time.

"Perhaps we'd better go below out of the weather Miss-er," Cramer stumbled. He felt subconsciously that he was backing down and that Kasoon was laughing at him.

"Compton—Mildred Compton," the girl assisted him, a faint smile curling up the corners of her mouth at the sudden scarlet tinge that showed underneath the tan on Nick's jaws.

Down in the cabin Cramer entirely forgot the presence of the other three. The girl slid out of her oilskins revealing a youthful, lissom body, and a rounded olive face. About it was a rebellious mop of auburn hair, with two eyes of limpid blue.

"Lissen here," Kasoon's voice broke in on Nick's pleasant reveries. "This here is old Chief Tunguss of the tribe up at Hoonyah, an' Milly's my cousin. We wanta go up to Hoonyah, an' we wants to go there quick. That's why I picked on the *Sunset,* 'cause she's fast. There's five hundred bones in it for you, an' I guess you needs it bad, eh? That'll about pay off old Jackobi."

"Five hundred!" Nick said to himself in surprise. "But what the devil does he mean by taking this girl to Hoonyah? It's away back from the beaten track. The place has a pretty evil reputation too; the coastguards were in there last fall about some beastly pagan rites the Indians were trying to pull off. No, damned if I'll sail. I'll let the schooner go under the hammer first."

"Oh, please, Captain Cramer!" the girl's soft voice pleaded, when she noted the frown settling down on Nick's face. "Really, it's most important and I'm anxious to go at once. Please say that you will."

Cramer wheeled about, and the frown left his features instantly. But his eyes were cold as they roved the girl once more. He could see that she possessed a faint strain of Indian blood—a tinge that served to add color to her cheeks, a vague wistfulness to her orbs.

"Very well," Nick said suddenly when the blue eyes did not flinch. "I'll take you up." To himself he added, "And I'll bring you back, what's more, if there's anything wrong about this. I need that five hundred worse than anything in the world right now, but there's nothing in the contract prohibiting me giving you a free pass back to Akutat."

"That's the stuff. Knew you liked money," Kasoon laughed, pulling a crowded wallet from the the pocket of his coat and peeling off five one-hundred dollar bills. He passed the over to the schooner's captain, with a gesture as though he were tossing a quarter to some unfortunate down-and-out.

THREE days later the *Sunset* threshed in from the open sea, ran up a long inlet under engine power, and so came to where beetling cliffs frowned down on an Indian village.

As the schooner neared the shore, Cramer's eyes roved. He saw a number of unpainted, rough lumber buildings set on stilts above the rocks. Fronting them were two dozen or more totem poles leaning over at crazy angles. Some were topped with the hideous wolf totem, others with eagle and bear figures. Below these on the narrow beach was a fleet of long dugout canoes, their bows emblazoned with the familiar rounded design of the whale god.

A wooden gong boomed ashore, when the schooner was sighted, and immediately the open spaces before the houses became crowded with figures. Yells and the baying of dogs came thinly over the water.

Nick drove in to within a hundred yards of the shore. Then at a nod from his comrade, Noland ducked below and shut off the coughing engine. When the boat lost way, Cramer let the anchor go, and with the *Sunset* motionless on the glassy water, watched a long canoe putting off for the ship.

When the craft came alongside, throaty, clucking phrases in Klingat were thrown up at Chief Tunguss by the men in the canoe, following which the old man elevated himself gingerly over the ship's side and was handed aft on the little vessel.

Mildred's grips were passed down; then she, too, went to the side. There the girl stopped in indecision, staring down at the grinning, coppered masks of the Indians below. Alarm was suddenly stamped on her pale face.

"What's the matter? What are you frightened of?" Cramer's voice sounded as his rubbers thudded on the wet deck, and one hand went out, gripping the girl's arm.

"Here, what's bitin' you?" Kasoon interjected, thrusting his great body between the two and jarring Nick's grip loose. "I got her a good job here teachin' school an' that's all you need to know. You got paid to bring us to Hoonyah, an' that's all what concerns you—"

"For two cents I'd pitch you into the inlet!" the schooner owner broke in on the other. "There's something wrong here, Kasoon, and that girl is not going ashore. To the devil with your five hundred. I'm taking her back to Akutat."

"You are, eh? Why, you mealy-mouthed slob, I'll—"

Crack! Nick's fist cut off the words. Blood leaped up on Kasoon's high-cheeked face in reply to the vicious jab that sent him reeling backward. But in a moment the big man recovered his balance and flung himself forward. Kasoon was no coward, and subconsciously he recognized that here was the opportunity to repay that hammering Cramer had given him before a grim-faced audience of fishermen in Sitka.

Battering fists, swirling out of a bull rush, forced Cramer back foot by foot. He felt the shattering blows, but was only half conscious of them. Nick exchanged blow for blow, but all his thoughts were centered on the mystery of the girl.

"Hey, you fool; watch out!" Noland's yelp suddenly rang in his ears. Too late! Nick's foot caught in a tangle of rope lying on the deck. As he swayed, vainly trying to regain his balance, Kasoon slashed out a withering uppercut that rocked the schooner owner's head and sent him to the deck.

"NOW, you sap, I'll chew your ears off!"

Kasoon threw himself down on Cramer's prostrate form, hands gripping at the other man's throat. The stubble on his jowls ground into Nick's clean-shaven face; hot breath beat on his neck.

"Suffering Moses!"

Noland's yell, followed by a wild scream from the girl, pierced Nick's brain—sent the blood pulsing through his aching body, brought every muscle into play.

Backed by two hundred pounds of bone and sinew, every ounce of energy Cramer possessed went into three crashing blows. They were too short to prove deadly, but they served their purpose in checking Kasoon's maniac clawing.

Half way to his knees, Nick's sweat-hazed eyes made out Noland's shape struggling with three Siwashes; saw that two others had grasped Mildred and were dragging her toward the ship's side.

That moment's breathing space was all that Kasoon required! A blundering jump carried him to his feet. A moment later he was at the bulwarks and had leaped out of sight, his laugh still ringing in Cramer's ears.

Nick whirled about and started to run forward, just in time to see Noland reel back as the Indians darted away from him. They threw the girl into the canoe and themselves vaulted lightly overside.

Cramer leaped for the shrouds, and hanging on with one hand, stretched the other out, vainly endeavoring to grip the canoe below.

*"Ka'moox!* Dog!" one of the Indians snarled at the white man. A painted paddle flashed. The sharp edge slammed down on Nick's out-thrust wrist, and with a grin of agony on his face the schooner captain pulled himself back out of range, bent double, nursing his agonized arm.

The long blades drove down, whirling the canoe over to where Kasoon's black head bobbed in the water. Through the

pain mists that were dimming his eyes Nick saw the big man being hauled aboard the canoe.

Kasoon shook himself, then reared upright in the vessel. He brandished one fist at Cramer, then waved it toward the struggling girl held down by the Siwashes.

"For Pete's sake . . . . show . . . . some savvy!" Noland's panting voice came in time to stop the frantic Cramer. One hand gripped Nick's shoulder as the schooner owner gathered himself for a spring.

"You must . . . . be . . . . crazy with the heat!" Fat choked out, still wrestling with his chum. "Heavy chance of swimmin' after them hoodlums an' winnin' the war. Come aboard, or I'll drag you in!"

Cramer made no reply. He stepped backward, to stand there with heaving chest, eyes still on the red-gold head in the canoe's stern.

"By Jupiter, no!" Nick threw out suddenly, "it'll be dark in an hour. I'll go ashore then and I'll bring her back if I have to kill off half that tribe."

Noland nodded to himself. Those hot words savored of cheap heroics, but he knew that Cramer was unconscious of them. The other man's strained face and tight lips told Fat that there would be trouble in Hoonyah that night.

FAINT lights sprang up in the windows of the huts ashore when finally a mantle of darkness clothed the mountains and blotted out the inlet's gray waters. With the night's coming, the wooden drum once more commenced its thudding.

Slipping about on the greasy rocks, their nostrils filled with the odors of seaweed, decaying wood and fish, Cramer and Noland slowly made their way up the beach. Now and then a dog whined from its shelter underneath the houses, but the animals made no outcry, being apparently accustomed to night prowlers.

Nick stopped at the first house, crept up on the creaking, rickety platform before it and peered it through a grimy window. One hand gripped Noland's arm, the door creaked, and they disappeared. Five minutes later they appeared again, both dressed in Indian clothing, smelling to high Heaven of fish oil and wood smoke. Each man's head was crowned with one of the Klingat dancing hats; woven out of willow withes, broad-brimmed and face-concealing.

Nick choked back his disgust at the odors arising from his Indian garments, descended from the platform and started to make his way toward the largest cabin at the end of the straggling "street."

From this dwelling a babel of noise welled out on the night air. There was a humming drone of throaty voices, almost blotted out at times by the monotonous booming of the drum.

"This is a potlash—a giving away dance," Nick whispered to the other man. "I know the sounds. You savvy what the custom is, eh? One Indian makes another a present of canoe, a net or something of the kind, and then in turn he can demand any gift he chooses from the other man. Before the night is over they'll have exchanged all their stuff. They get well wound up over it too; excited is no name for it. Listen to that racket! We'll be able to slip in easily enough. All right, Fat, old timer."

"Sure. We'll get in okay, but how the hell are we going to get out again? That's what interests me," Noland grumbled to himself.

Pulling the dancing hat further down over his face, and hunching wide shoulders lazily, Cramer stepped up on the platform before the Chief's house, listened for a moment to the medley of sounds from within, then pushed forward through the doorway.

"*Nanich kopa moossoom*? Are you dreaming?" the schooner owner hissed in Chinook, when a burly back halted his progress.

The Indian grunted and for a moment the whites of his eyes glinted in the half light. Then he made way for the two men. They pushed forward by half a dozen other lounging shapes, until finally Cramer reached a position where he could see all that was going on.

The low, smoke-blackened interior of the Chief's house resembled a museum. On the rough walls were hung great wooden shields covered with crude designs in red and black —wolf heads, leering, half-human faces and the familiar whale's head totem. Long, carved canoe paddles leaned against the walls, with a wild jumble of gaudily fringed Chilkat blankets, dancing hats, spears and masks.

But these things held Nick's interest for a moment only. His hard eyes ranged the interest coppered faces under the coarse black hair until they settled on Chief Tunguss' parchment-like features, where the old man sat hunched upon a raised platform. Beside him Kasoon's bulk reared up in the half light.

CRAMER leaned forward, staring with all his eyes. All at once a cold shiver struck down his spine. Mildred Compton was seated at the Chief's feet, shoulders covered with one of the gaudily embroidered Chilkat blankets, her glinting hair and white face showing up in startling relief against the murky background of crowding bodies.

Tunguss was droning some address in Klingat. Nick was only half aware of the words. His gaze was still on the girl's blanched face. Was that a totem sign? Could it be possible that—?

"Christopher!" the schooner owner breathed, when suddenly his peering eyes came to realize the significance of the vivid smearings on Mildred's white forehead. There a hideous face had been painted. It was a whale's head, open-mouthed, evil-eyed, and set off by two enormous ears, striped in gaudy reds and greens.

Tunguss' voice jarred his mind again; now Nick's ears caught the words as the old man droned on and on in Klingat:

"Behold this is a very strong potlash of many great gifts. Kasoon is very strong also. The old days have returned. No longer do the white men dare to interfere in the laws of the Klingats. Therefore he has brought us a maiden of white blood, that she be sent to speak for us to Konna-ka, the Diving Whale God."

Tunguss' clucking drone ceased for a moment, as his cunning eyes swept about the rows of faces, nothing the effect of the speech. A hissing murmur of approval greeted him.

Cramer felt the hair rise at the base of his head when the full meaning of the Chief's words blazed across his brain. Mildred was a sacrifice to appease the fishing gods; her forehead was marked with the medicine man's totem! She was doomed! In a flash he recognized that this tribe, remote from contact with the government's influence, was reverting to the pagan barbarities practiced by their ancestors during the Russian occupation of Alaska.

"The death of a white maiden is very strong medicine," Tunguss' throaty voice came again. "Kasoon has made us a rich gift and, behold, we return to him another as rich. He is a great fisherman and desires greatly that his boats alone shall take the salmon from the waters of Hoonyah. Have we not kept these waters from the white men for many years? Did not fishing boats from Wrangell and Sitka come and never return? Chakotloos! Are not the salmon so thick in the season that one may walk across dry footed? Ai! Ai! Therefore, our present to this strong one is that he alone of all the white men may fish in these waters and, therefore, become of great wealth. This, then, is our gift for the gift of her who goes to please the Whale Diving God!"

A sickening sensation enveloped Cramer's long body at the words, drowned suddenly by a burst of guttural clacking from the Indians.

"So that's the devilish scheme," Nick told himself. "Kasoon is giving his cousin to these savages for a sacrifice to the gods, and in return he's getting the exclusive fishing rights of this inlet. Oh Lord, what the deuce can I do?"

Cramer's eyes ranged wildly from the weapons on the wall to the rows of bronzed faces, now swaying back and forth in response to some kind of chant—then to where Mildred was crouched, head bent down on her breast.

A sense of utter helplessness flooded Nick's mind. What could he do, single-handed, against these savages? Why, there must be at least two hundred Klingats crowded into the hut. But he could not let Mildred fall into their hands alive. No, he'd—

A wild leap over the bent backs of the nearest Indians cut off the thoughts. Yelps of astonishment fractured the natives' sing-song droning as Nick blundered across the hut. But in a moment the softer sounds were changed to a volley of yells when the white man burst a passage through one group that had suddenly risen up to halt his progress. He reached the wall behind the platform.

A jerk tore loose one of the ten foot canoe paddles; heavily carved, flat and thin

bladed. Swirling it back over his shoulder Nick darted back toward the wall of faces.

WITH every muscle behind it the red and black blade whistled through the air. Nick felt a tremor run up his arms when the weapon jarred against Chief Tunguss' skull—and the paddle handle snapped off short in his hands.

A snarl came to the white man's lips as the broken paddle slipped from his hands. Dimly conscious of Kasoon's face and a fruitless arm that shot out at him, Nick ran across the platform, and jerked Mildred to her feet.

Cramer felt the girl pull herself out of his grasp, then sensed her hands clinging to his shirt. With it a sudden warm flush pulsed over his body. Mildred had torn herself loose so that he might have both hands free. Here was a girl worth fighting for!

The youngster's shoulder heaved and thrust. Hard fists sent shocking blows into the bronzed masks, fractured by those rolling eyes.

Yells and shouted orders in Klingat rang back from the low roof in an insane jumble of sounds. Every muscle in Cramer's body ached as he charged this way and that in short rushes, now striving to battle a passage to the door, again leaping about to face another foe from behind, when Milly's tightening hands warned him of danger.

But the babel of sounds that drummed on his ears made no impression. Two thoughts only filled his mind. Would he ever reach that door? What the devil had become of Noland?

A sudden high-noted cry from the girl brought Nick whirling about again—just as two great, greasy arms shot about his neck and a hard knee was pressed into the small of his back. A yelp of triumph broke from the natives, when another Indian took advantage of the white man's plight. Hands fastened on Nick's ankles and brought him to the ground with a thud.

Now a dozen hands were clawing at his breast and throat. Through the sweat that blinded him Cramer was vaguely conscious of feet, feet, feet! They came forward in regiments, stamping and trampling.

Another cry from the girl pierced his mind. At the note of terror in her voice Nick made one last superhuman effort. The man holding onto his back loosened his hands with a groan when the schooner captain's fist found his stomach. There came a rending of cloth and the panting Cramer was on his feet, tattered shirt hanging from his shoulders by a few threads.

Half a dozen feet away Mildred was struggling with two Indians. Beyond her Kasoon's bulk reared up over the twisting heads as he thrust a passage through the mob, shouting some orders that apparently went unheard.

Nick was vaguely conscious of the bound that carried him over to the girl and of the slashing blows that set her free. But he knew this was the end. Grim realization pricked his mind. Hope was gone.

SUDDENLY Milly's voice came again, shrilling something his dazed brain could not pick up. Her finger nails dug into his flesh when she tugged at the remnants of his shirt and tore the tattered garment from his body.

*"Kwij-kwij! Wahpoos!"*

With the words there came a sudden astonishing silence that drummed on the ears like lead. It was broken only by wheezing breaths, shuffling and the Indian's guttural voice that rang out like a bugle.

"Stop! Stop!" Mildred shrilled in Chinook at Kasoon.

The big man shook his head and continued to thrust forward. Another order from the girl in the coast tongue, and two Indians fastened themselves on Kasoon's arms and, despite his insane oaths, prevented his moving forward.

"Oh, Nick, Nick, can't you see?" Mildred appealed tugging at Cramer's bare arm. "Look at the Indians; they're frightened! That tattooing on your chest. Quick! You've got to think quick!"

"Tattooing?" the white man said half to himself, bleared eyes going down to the multitude of crude designs in red and blue that covered his great frame. Tattooing? Well, it had been a kid's crazy notion to get that done. Sure made a guy look like thirty cents. But what was the sense in talking about it at a time like this?

His eyes roved again out over the sea of staring faces and tousled black heads. Through the haze that still clouded his mind, Nick recognized that a strange change had swept over the Klingats.

Instead of pressing forward, now the Indians were shoving away from him, coppered visages filled with awe. They hissed at each other in the native tongue, those in front stamping and elbowing the men behind them to get farther away from the white man and the girl. This sudden change in their demeanor was bewildering—extraordinary. What in blazes could it possibly mean?

"The Diving Whale God!" Milly's urgent voice smote him again as one white hand patted his bare chest. "You've got it there, with all those snakes, ships and things. Oh, Heavens, you're terrible! Can't you see that the Indians think you are a blood brother of the tribe, or you wouldn't be carrying that sacred sign? See the way they're looking at you. Quick, tell them!"

Kasoon had caught the import of the girl's gestures. A roar burst from him. He tore himself loose from the Indians.

One of Cramer's arms swept Mildred behind him, but the gesture was unnecessary. Half a dozen more natives threw themselves on Kasoon, and despite his great strength the man was helpless.

An urgent nudge from the girl. Cramer gathered his scattered wits and called in Chinook at the top of his voice:

"Are you all fools, you people of Hoonyah? Am I, the son's son of Kon-no-ka, the Diving Whale God, to suffer thus because I come to the earth place from the clouds? I come seeking my woman, and finding her go again without strife, else there will be wailing. Do you dare to insult this totem?"

Cramer pulled his frame to its full height and pointed at the hideous whale's head hanging above the platform. Every eye followed the gesture—from the white man's tattooed breast to the wooden god.

"My father's father has brought vengeance to Tunguss, your Chief, because of his evil. The Diving Whale God kills all those that stand in his path, and as for this one, Kasoon—"

*Boom!*

A rifle shot filled the crowded hut with roaring echoes. There came a sudden chorus of thin yelps, then silence again. Kasoon gripped at his chest with one great paw and slumped forward. For a moment the bewildered Indians held him, then let his body thud to the ground.

"EVERY time I shies I gets me a cocoanut!" came from the dark portals of the door in cheery tones. "Ain't no guy at Coney Island what'll stick his face through a hole in the canvas when Mister Noland, the Boy Wonder, is on the job. Got him first crack. That's shootin', crew!"

"Quick! Quick!" Mildred urged, tugging at Cramer's arm. "The Indians don't understand English. They think this is part of the Diving Whale's vengeance too. Oh, Nick, Nick, you're—"

"Great Scot, it's Noland!" Cramer whispered to the girl, thrusting an arm about her waist. Then with a sweeping gesture of contempt, he waved the staring Klingats aside and passed on toward the door, followed by the rolling eyes of the natives.

"Pinched this rusty old Winchester outa one of the huts, but she sure shoots good," Fat announced as the three stepped hurriedly across the platform and leaped down on the rocks. "But, how the heck did you—"

Nick patted his ornamented chest shamefacedly, then wheeled half about to glance back over his shoulder. Now the chief's doorway was crowded with faces, but none of the Indians left the hut's shelter.

"I'll take a crack at 'em, whilst you two beat it for the boat," Fat suggested, throwing up the rifle. Cramer struck it aside.

"No," he ordered. "Blood-brother stuff, Fat. We're safe as houses now. Go ahead and get the boat ready; we're going aboard."

Noland's quick eyes noted the position of the tattooed arm, saw the shy smile on the girl's face.

"I know darned well what this means," Fat grumbled to himself padding off into the night, nostrils filled with the sea's salty tang. "I'll be squatting in that boat for an hour. Oh, well, not such a bad trip after all. We got the schooner paid for anyhow, and by heck we're gettin' a cook, too, from the look of it. Hey, crew! Wonder can she make civilized hot-cakes? Answer me that!"

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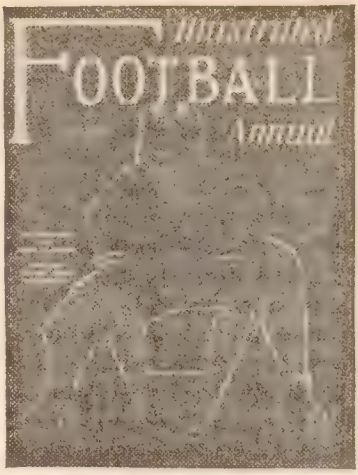


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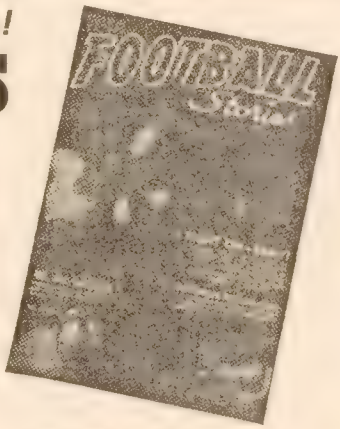


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# No Law Below Zero

By A. de HERRIES SMITH

**Redcoats north! Far into the frigid Bering's uncharted pack Corporal McCree followed a blood-specked murder trail—led by the will-o'-wisp lure of a fair-haired girl, and the ghostly crew of a long-dead mystery ship!**

EXCEPT for the mournful howls of the Eskimo sleigh dogs tied to the rocks on the shingled beach, Fort Herschel was wrapped in slumber. But for some mysterious reason or another sleep evaded Corporal Dick McCree of the Mounted Police.

Warned perhaps by the northman's sixth sense, a feeling came to him that some devilment out of the usual was afoot. Having tossed to and fro on his bed for the better part of an hour, he finally got up and lit a cigarette. Buckling on his revolver belt, he stepped softly out of the barrack room on moccasined feet.

Everything was peaceful. The faint, cold rays of the moon shone down on the white sails of the trading schooners tied to the rock dock, on the skin shelters of the Arctic natives strung along the beach, and tipped the bobbing icebergs being carried out on the current.

McCree listened, went a few feet, listened again, and heard nothing at all. Still a vague uneasiness possessed him as he retraced his steps.

Constable Andrew Burke was sleeping soundly. This habit of Andy's to sleep through peace and war was irritating at times. McCree shook him now, none too gently.

"There's something wrong here, Andy! Don't know what it is but I can sure feel it," he confided, as his chum joined him outside.

Burke, rubbing his sleepy eyes, yawned: "What I'd like to feel is that pillow again, you darned old nighthawk! However, if you want to ease your mind, old-timer, let's take a ramble up the hills and give the prospective tragedy the once over."

"Fine; come on."

Action was meat and drink to a man of McCree's stamp. He wasn't afraid of anything that ran on two feet or four, but he admitted to himself he was worried. There was that yarn of Hanz Dorberg's to figure on. Out of the Eastern Arctic Dorberg had come on his schooner, bringing word of a strange craft that had robbed and pillaged the Eskimo settlements on King William's Land—burning, destroying, killing. And a few hours distant—at daylight to be precise—he and Burke were scheduled to set sail to discover the trouble; Dorberg to accompany them as pilot, by

his own request and the commanding officer's blind orders.

Winding in and out over the brown tundra hills fresh suspicions and doubts assailed the Corporal's active mind. Why was this man Dorberg so anxious to go back on the Mounted Police patrol boat? Why should he be willing to sacrifice the short three months of open water, so precious to the traders?

"Here," commented McCree, "is some new style of Arctic hellery—as if we didn't have enough on our hands already." But what it was, neither man could tell.

MORE than half an hour elapsed before they reached the lookout station, from which each day the men of Fort Herschel gazed anxiously down toward the dim Northwest, out of which the tall masts of the yearly supply ships must soon appear above the welter of float ice—if they succeeded in battling their way through the berg-choked Bering Straits.

"Huh! Everything in the Arctic garden is lovely, Dick—Wow! Suffering cats!" spluttered Burke, grabbing the corporal's arm, and pointing to the far side of the island. "By James, if you weren't right after all! See that one?"

McCree saw a rocket soar soundlessly up into the zenith. It burst in a shower of white, followed in quick succession by others of red and green.

"Red, white and green—the Russian colors!" breathed the corporal, enlightenment dawning in his watching eyes. He turned back to Burke with an exclamation. "Say, Andy, we're blind and Major Bristow is worse than that. Listen! The name of that schooner which came in yesterday is Russian—*Baikal* is a Siberian lake. Her captain, Kharkoff is certainly a Russ, and his pal Dorberg might be anything. There's going to be Hell popping in the Arctic before long and you and I, old scout, will have to go it alone. The major wouldn't believe our story if we told him; he'd call it a case of nerves. So it's up to us to keep quiet and hop to it! Savvy?"

Trouble, for no reason whatever, always amused Burke. A broad grin spread across his bronzed face now. "Lead me to it, Dickie! Let the former bright and shining star of the good old Third U. S. Cavalry tangle with these gents! If the Yanks and the Canucks can't put the kibosh on this business, nobody can! But the thing is—who are these lads signaling to?"

"We'll find that out later," McCree jerked out. "Come on; we'd better get down to the patrol boat and see if they have tried any monkey business there. Got your gun? All right, mush, you old malamute!"

The two Mounties padded down the trail in high spirits. The air had cleared somewhat. At least they were sure now there was something to chase to earth.

BEFORE they had gone a dozen feet Burke felt the corporal's arm nudge him, and turned sharply to see McCree breaking into a run. The constable followed him at a lope down the sloping, moss-carpeted valley toward the direction from which the signal flares had been sent up.

Stopping to listen, scarcely breathing for fear their ears should lose it, they caught it again—faint and weak. A woman's cry of distress!

Neither man spoke. It was a moment for action, not words. They plunged on down in the half-light, until the narrow, shingled beach rose up to meet them at the foot of the rolling hills.

"That wasn't a native woman's voice," panted Burke, as he drew up alongside McCree.

"No. It came from a white woman, and there don't happen to be any on the island that I know of," McCree replied shortly, adding: "My God! There it is again!" as the cry, little more than a thread of sound, was carried out on the thin air.

It came from behind now! They knew they had passed no one on the narrow beach, and yet the cry came from the hillside. Baffled, McCree surveyed the tundra-clad slopes rolling up and away from the beach at their feet.

"Must be a cave of some kind here! Get down and look for an entrance," he ordered, dropping onto his knees to grope back and forth along the base of the hill. The sharp flints pierced their hands and legs as they moved about.

A sudden grunt of satisfaction turned Burke about in time to see the pair of long legs and yellow moccasins belong-

ing to McCree wriggling out of sight.

Burke lost no time. He had no intention of being left behind. Throwing himself after the corporal he wormed his way up a damp, narrow tunnel in which there was just sufficient room for a large man to squeeze forward and no more.

A little farther on, the tunnel widened.

Lying motionless both men saw ahead of them a flickering light playing on the glazed walls of an ice cave.

Again came the cry—now clear and distinct!

McCree was on his feet, revolver drawn, and racing across the uneven floor of the cavern.

COWERING against the damp wall, her bare white shoulders almost covered with a mantle of soft, brown hair was a girl—not a native, but a white woman. Bending over her was a thick-set, black-bearded man mouthing in broken English:

"You vas my woman now, see? You do vat I say, or—"

Cr-ack! Cr-ack! The blued barrel of a service revolver came down on the man's wrist with a sickening thud of steel on bone; the corporal's left fist shot out to send him reeling across the cave. He stumbled and lay still.

"This concludes the evening's program. Mounted Police radiophone station now signing off. Good night, everybody!" Burke's lazy, good-natured voice broke the tense silence. McCree frowned.

The corporal touched the trembling girl on the arm and left his hand there to steady her. It was years since he had set eyes on a white woman, and this girl was lovely.

The fear in her eyes—brown they were, but black with the terror that had assailed her—had given place to relief. Limply she leaned her light weight against him.

McCree was no saint. Thrown into daily contact with the women of an inferior race he had known the light loves of the far north. But whatever other feeling flamed through his body now he crushed at once. This girl was of his own people, gentle, friendless, to be protected.

Hysterical sobbing shook her from head to foot. McCree looked helplessly at Burke.

"Kiss her! That's the only way to bring 'em to!" that incorrigible optimist assured him, much to his displeasure.

"Well, how the devil am I going to find out what it is all about if she keeps on like this?"

McCree tugged at his uniform nervously. At the same moment the girl's assailant got to his feet, nursing his injured arm, and advanced on the corporal with an attempt at bravado.

"What the hell d'ya think you're doin' here? What right you got to mix up wid me an' my woman? You cursed Mounted Police—"

"Mounted Police!" The girl pressed closer and the whispered words were not lost on McCree. He raised his hand with a protecting gesture that held the hint of a caress, but dropped it promptly.

"Well, she likes the Mounted Police—some of 'em anyhow. We know that much," chuckled Andy. Then to the stranger, "Here you, walrus-face, stay in the five cent seats where you belong!" The constable pushed him back with a gesture that was far from delicate.

The girl had stopped crying and McCree waited patiently in the hope that she would tell him what had happened.

"I was so afraid you would not get here. I knew you would, though!" She smiled a wet, grateful little smile.

"Won't you please tell us what happened to bring you here?" he questioned gravely.

He tried to bring his gaze to rest upon her impersonally, as the light from a ship's lantern, hanging on a peg in the ice wall, lighted up her rounded face when she turned to him obediently.

THERE was an appeal to his chivalry in her every action, but the thought flashed, lightning-pointed through his mind: "Why should a girl of her apparent refinement be in the company of such a man, in a territory devoid of white women?" There was something more to this perhaps than either he or Burke guessed, and he must not let his feelings run away with him.

McCree shrugged his shoulders, unclasped the slim hands from his arm and wheeled on the stranger.

"Well?"

The foreigner grinned insinuatingly as he lurched forward.

"Just what I said. What the blazes d'ya think I'm doing up in the Arctic with her? Said she vas my woman, didn't I? Going east with me on my schooner. Brought her up from Seattle. What kind of women do the traders bring in? Answer that! Little innocent school girl? Ya! Ya! Why, she's nothing but—"

If the girl had been weak before she was strong now, confronting the leering brute like a vicious little tongue of flame. He cowered before the wrath that sprang at him with all the vengeance of an overwrought mind—but it was only for a moment, and she fell back beside McCree, white and spent.

"You cowardly, lying cur!" The corporal's eyes were narrowed to deadly pin points. There was a sharp, reverberating report, an acrid smell of gun smoke, and silence.

Burke nodded cheerfully. "Fine work! You gave him a one way ticket to where they don't have to haul driftwood for the winter fires! Just about now he's arguing the point with old St. Peter!"

The corporal put the girl aside and felt the man's heart. He appeared to be dead.

"Take this lady down to the commanding officer's quarters," McCree called to Burke over his shoulder. "See that the Eskimo house-girls make her comfortable until some arrangements can be made to send her back to wherever she came from. I want you to meet me at the patrol boat just as soon as you get back."

The girl hesitated. "Don't you want to know my name or—?"

"I'll get that later, thank you." McCree told her stiffly, without looking up.

She picked up a coat from the floor of the cave, and with her chin ridiculously high scrambled out at the constable's heels.

## II

WHEN the two Mounties reached the patrol boat each scrambled up and lay along one of the mainsail booms. By pulling the canvas about them they were effectually concealed.

"Quiet now, Andy!" McCree cautioned, as the sound of voices aboard the *Baikal* drifted across to them.

They waited patiently for fully half an hour before the silence was broken by footfalls on the Russian schooner. The men felt the *Aurora* list slightly as the intruder came aboard from the other vessel.

McCree watched him step softly to the stern, swing in the Colt quickfirer, deftly untie the gun's waterproof cover, make some motion he could not pick up, and then without even looking about him, step off the vessel again.

The corporal wriggled free of his hiding place, whispering to Burke, "You see to that gun; I'm going over to the *Baikal* to make look-see. Back in a jiffy. Wait for me ashore."

The constable watched him crawl along on hands and knees, saw him reach the other schooner's deck, and ease his weight aboard on fingers and toes.

As McCree expected, a light showed from the narrow ports above the cabin. Worming his way aft he cautiously looked down to see Dorberg, Kharkoff and two other men, whom he did not recognize, grouped about a folding table.

With a stubby pencil Dorberg was marking a map of the Arctic, apparently tracing a vessel's course eastward from Herschel Island. They talked in Russian. McCree caught only the words, important enough in themselves, "Dolphin Straits, Coronation Gulf, Admiralty Island." Stopping there, Dorberg marked a complete circle about the island and drew a cross through it. He then folded up the map and tossed it to Kharkoff, who said something in his native tongue, slapped Dorberg on the back and reaching up to a cupboard behind him brought forth a black bottle and some glasses.

It was with difficulty that McCree contained his mirth. He chuckled softly as he slid down. Now he knew where the strange vessel lay! In no time he was back on shore, and with Burke beside him making his way to the barracks.

"Any luck, Andy?"

"Nothing much; just a packet of dynamite poked into the muzzle of the Colt!" the constable replied flippantly, exhibiting his find.

"Just as I thought! They sure were going to fix it so that the *Aurora* would not bother them. Well, I'd say Mr. Dorberg was going to get the surprise of his life before this trip is over. Lord! I'm tired. Let's hit the hay."

CLEAR of the land, the westerly wind lifted the sea-ice fog, rustling the little ensign on the *Aurora's* stern. McCree noted the breeze and yelled to Burke and Barton, "Fair wind now, boys; shut off the engine, Andy. We'll stick up the rags and save gas."

The other men clambered on deck. In a few minutes the patrol boat's masts were clothed in white. Bending gently to the breeze she slipped along on her course to Coronation Gulf, eight hundred miles to the east.

"Take a squint to the north, skipper, and see who's here!" Andy nudged the corporal, who saw through the glasses another vessel following the *Aurora's* example, also headed for the East, but laying a course which kept her farther north.

The two exchanged significant glances, but there was no time for speech for Dorberg was coming aft. He, too, saw the vessel, and his grunt of satisfaction was not lost on the two men standing by the wheel.

All that day the breeze held, driving the police cruiser steadily on her course. Sundown revealed the other craft still in the offing, her sails shining against the green of the Beaufort Sea, her bows a smother of foam.

"Holy jumping Jehosophat!" In sheer amazement Burke dropped the spokes of the steering wheel he had just taken over. The schooner jibed off the wind and lay with her sails rattling and flapping as he pointed in the direction of the cabin.

McCREE followed his finger and leaned weakly against the gunwale, for peering out over the coaming was a bright, oval face, the small, arrogant head crowned with a soft mass of brown hair. There was no mistaking her. The girl of the cave was a stowaway on the *Aurora!*

McCree was furious. He strode over to where she was curled like a sleepy kitten on a pile of bags.

"What do you mean by this, madam? Do you realize—?"

She broke in on his angry voice, a little frightened, but not at all cast down.

"Please listen to me," she announced calmly. "Come into the cabin and I will explain everything."

There was little else to do but follow her. In the cabin the corporal perched stiffly on the edge of his berth and waited. "This girl is playing for time," he reflected.

She met his cold eyes and dropped her own. McCree managed to control the sense of admiration he felt mounting; by an effort he emphasized to himself that duty came first.

"Well?"

She glanced up and McCree thought he detected a fleeting smile. Was it possible that she was laughing at him?

"I feel sure that you must think frightful things of me, but I am not what I seem. You must believe that! You will, won't you?"

She waited expectantly for his answer, but none was forthcoming, and a sudden defiance lifted her chin airily as she went on: "There is a great deal I would like to tell you, but my lips are sealed for the present. I have a mission to fulfill in the Arctic. Until it is completed you must trust me. I believe you will."

"Pretty darned cool!" McCree thought to himself. He wished she wasn't so pretty, though. Those little tendrils of brown hair were bobbing between him and the narrow path of duty.

"Damn!" he muttered impatiently. "She doesn't look like one of those singed butterflies of the outside. Her eyes are too clear. But still. . . . He hated to do it, but there wasn't anything else. "I'm sorry, but you must consider yourself my prisoner until you see fit to explain your movements. I arrest you in the name of the King!"

The corporal was not prepared for her faintly mocking and apparently satisfied, "Oh, how lovely! And, of course, you'll let me stay on the *Aurora?*" The edged charm of her smile was not lost on the Mountie.

"Yes," he retorted bitterly. "You'll remain on the schooner because I can't very well put you ashore on an uninhabited island. It would be better for you if it could be managed. We are engaged in risky work; all our lives are in danger and now you have complicated things beautifully. I must demand that you give me some particulars regarding yourself."

The corporal jerked out the collapsible table, rummaged around in his sea chest, pulled out a bundle of printed forms and commenced to fill in one of the papers.

"Name and nationality, please?"

The girl leaned ever so lightly above his shoulder. McCree frowned.

"Margaret Vernon—but, of course, my friends always call me Molly," she murmured frivolously.

The corporal squirmed uncomfortably, waiting with pen poised.

"Er—business or profession?"

"Oh! Spinster to be sure."

She refused to treat the matter seriously.

Well, he'd show her!

"Place of residence?"

"Oh! Just put down United States, west of the Rocky Mountains," Molly Vernon told him airily.

BANG! McCree was on his feet. The table whirled across the little cabin. He caught her by the wrists and shook the girl roughly. The laughter swept out of her eyes like fire before a sudden dash of rain.

"You great big bully! You're just like the rest, and I did think you were better than the other men in this horrible country."

The contempt in her voice left the Mountie groping helplessly for a word sufficient in itself to relieve the situation—but speech eluded him.

She stepped backwards quickly and stumbled, striking her head a glancing blow on one of the steel uprights.

McCree's panther-like muscles shot him through the air. He caught her before she fell. Tenderness came to him easily in spite of his greath strength. He bent his head slowly and kissed the scarlet mouth, no longer mocking but very still.

She stirred, moaned a little and opened her eyes. Her head hurt and she clung dizzily to McCree.

"You said I was your prisoner, didn't you?" She smiled painfully.

"I didn't mean—I didn't—oh, blazes, what do I. mean?" McCree finished under his breath, avoiding her eyes.

"Holy pink-toed Eliza! Suffering ca—! Hey, Dick, come on deck right away! Quick now!" Burke's voice filled the cabin as his rounded face, split with a delighted grin, appeared over the hatchway coaming.

Molly Vernon left the shelter of the corporal's arms with as much dignity as she could summon in spite of the fact that her knees were far from bearing her weight with any attempt at steadiness, and her hair was falling in disorder about her shoulders.

McCree took an indecisive step after Andy, lingered a brief second, then vaulted out of the cabin to where Burke, Barton and Dorberg were pointing and gesticulating wildly astern.

"Good God!" the corporal ejaculated as his gaze swept the water, now teeming with sudden life. The Arctic was alive with sea-lions!

EVERYWHERE the huge rounded heads seemed to be breaking the surface, the roars of the great animals appearing almost to shake the ship. The sun glinted from long tusks that had spelt death to many small vessels sailing these barren coasts.

McCree knew they were gathering to attack the schooner, and immediate action was the only thing that would save them.

"You, Dorberg, rip the cover off that gun!" But the Mountie spoke to empty air, for the Russian was halfway to the bows; he had not forgotten the charge of dynamite placed in the barrel!

Burke laughed and tore the tarpaulin off the Colt, threading the cartridge belt.

"Keep her straight ahead, Barton," McCree called over his shoulder, as he ran for the cabin where the service rifles were racked.

The girl tried to brush past him, to go on deck.

"You can't go up! No! I am in command of this ship. You will do just exactly as I say!" He picked Molly Vernon up and tossed her into one of the bunks out of his way. There was no time for courtesy. She slid down again, indignant and flushed. McCree shoved the girl aside brusquely, jerked the rifles out of the rack, and raced back to the deck.

## III

"CR-ACK, cr-ack, cr-ack!" The Colt spat a steady stream of lead across the water, churning foam, deadening the roars that filled the air.

Here and there great animals threshed the bloody water in dying fury, but still the herds pressed forward, their fins send-

ing up clouds of spray, heads and shoulders elevated above the sea with the speed at which they race downward to the schooner.

"Hell! There are hundreds of the brutes!" McCree spat out, savagely throwing down the smoking rifle.

Another weapon was forced into his hands. Surprised, he looked down to see the girl's brown head bent over a Lee-Enfield, deft fingers forcing the nickeled shells into the magazine. She looked up, met his eyes and smiled before bending again to her task.

The little schooner trembled with the speed at which her wide-open engine was driving her forward. Her sails flapped, neglected, as Barton headed her steadily offshore. White waves danced back from the *Aurora's* bows, but the three men knew that the herds were gaining upon them. Looking back, they could see the pig eyes gleaming redly in the sun. Between the explosions of the machine gun and the crackling of the rifles they could hear the deep, harsh breathing. There was a reasonless fury about the whole horrible hunting pack.

"Oh! Look! Look!" The girl jumped, screaming, to her feet and pointed to the starboard gunwale. Burke swore viciously and swung the muzzle of the Colt inboard. It jammed. He wrenched and tugged at the levers without success, left the machine gun, snatched up a rifle and ran forward to where a huge head reared above the rail. The infuriated sea-lion tore at the slender woodwork with its eight-foot tusks, splintering the planking of the deck.

With a yell Burke rammed the muzzle of the rifle into the immense, gaping mouth and emptied the magazine.

The sea-lion roared, threshed wildly for a moment, then hung inert over the side. It was dead, but in death proved more disastrous than in life. The great bulk listed the schooner to one side; she slackened her speed. Instead of racing forward she commenced to circle slowly.

"This is the end," moaned Molly Vernon, covering her face with her hands.

All about the ship the sea was black with the shining, oily bodies shoving, jostling each other in frenzied attempts to reach the schooner.

Burke raced past the girl to fire point-blank into the vicious eyes of another brute in the act of rearing its monstrous head above the rail. It fell back, gurgling sickeningly, but the gap was immediately filled.

"Hey! McCree! Over here—quick!" Barton shouted from where he was wrenching at the steering-wheel in a futile endeavor to keep the vessel on her course.

An excited yell from the corporal at the same instant brought the others running aft. He was lying flat on the deck. They saw him yank out his long sheath knife and slash out over the stern at something.

In another moment he came to his feet, and with legs braced whirled a round object above his head and let go. The thing sailed through the air and lit in the water some twenty yards behind the schooner.

There was a chorus of maddened howls from the sea-lions. They raced at the floating black dot, tearing at it with their long white tusks, beating at it with their flippers.

Burke jerked an ax out of its clips alongside the deckhouse and slashed at the tusks of the beast hanging to the vessel's side. When he stepped back, exhausted, Barton snatched the ax from him. In a few minutes two shattered ivory tusks lay on the deck. The bloody head disappeared overboard.

The schooner righted herself. Barton sprang for the wheel again. The *Aurora* sped away from the jumble of shining bodies which still fought and tore at the elusive black dot bobbing about in the water, churned now to thick foam, red-tinted.

Molly Vernon laid her hand on the corporal's arm.

"Walrus medicine!" he explained shortly in answer to her unspoken query.

"Walrus medicine? What a funny name! What does it mean?"

"Just this: Someone on board the schooner tied that bag of putrid whale meat under the *Aurora's* stern, knowing it would attract all the sea-lions from here to Kingdom Come. It's an old whaler's trick, used by all the vessels that come in here from the Pacific to hunt the white whales and the sea-lions."

McCree stared at her oddly and walked away. He came back before he had gone more than a few feet to thank her for the help she had given. Then he saw that the girl's hands were bruised and stained with

blood. He took the hands in his big paws.

"Have you changed your mind about me?" she inquired archly, letting him examine the torn fingers. McCree dropped them as though they had been red hot, flushing beneath his tan.

A few feet away Burke and Barton, with arms about each other's shoulders, were engaged in a step dance, gazing at one another in a good imitation of rapt ecstasy, and from the bows Dorberg was making his way aft.

"I'll get one of the boys to fix up the forward cabin for you, Miss Vernon; it's small, but we cannot help that," McCree told her, and walked away.

The girl faced the sea, an inscrutable smile touching her mouth. It might have meant anything or nothing.

"Damned if I'll believe it! I can't!" McCree muttered to himself as she disappeared below decks, reviewing and rejecting the fears and suspicions that crowded into his mind.

Dorberg advanced with a sickly smile, only to be shoved aside by the corporal as he roared at the two dancing men: "Cut that out! Barton, you make up the forward cabin for Miss Vernon. Take the wheel, Burke; I'm going below."

WITH Burke at the wheel the patrol boat was feeling her way through the narrow Dolphin straits in the dark. Completely exhausted, McCree was sleeping soundly, but Barton could not compose himself.

After a time he crept lightly out of the bunk and lay flat on the floor of the cabin with his ear against the partition.

It was impossible to hear much owing to the noise of the oil engine. He placed his hands on the wooden wall of the bulkhead and divined that there was some movement behind it. The swinging lamp lighted the cabin but faintly.

Whatever was in his mind, he changed it, and returning to the bunk lay there, still keeping his hands against the partition. It was plain from the peculiar trembling of the frame that the screws which held the uprights were being withdrawn. Presently a slight current of air became noticeable. He figured that one section of the bulkhead was being removed.

Barton got up on his hands and feet to see in the gloomy light one shadow darker than the others bend forward. A hand reached up to the top of the gasoline reservoir.

The Mountie threw himself headlong. With one bound he was on the Russian. There was a crash of woodwork and a heavy thud as the two bodies hurtled back into the main hold.

"McCree! Dick! Dick!" Barton shouted in the dark. The Russian was on top now, had him by the throat. If he could just last out until McCree came!

The corporal was out of his deep sleep instantly. He turned up the light and broke into sudden action as the sounds from beyond the partition smote his ears. Slamming off the throttle of the engine with one hand he caught up his revolver and leaped into the dark.

"Hey! What's coming off here? Who shut down that engine?" roared Burke, running to the cabin. He saw the broken partition and straightway dived into the hold.

Barton lay on his face, groaning and coughing blood. McCree was kneeling on the body of the Russian with the butt of his revolver against his head. He saw Burke and called to him:

"Help me lift Barton. I'm afraid the poor old boy is done for." As gently as they could the two Mounties carried the constable back into the cabin and laid him on the bunk. "I'll attend to Charlie, Burke. You get the handcuffs on that man. Hurry, before he comes to."

The wounded man opened his eyes. "No use, Dick—" He coughed, falling back weakly against the other's arm. "Dorberg had a knife." He groaned as McCree ripped open his shirt, endeavoring to stop the flow of blood with a compress.

"I'm going West, Dick—no use to do that—this is the end. Tell the boys at Herschel—" He was speaking with great difficulty. The voice died and broke away into a whisper, "Passed out on active service, Dick; that's—"

The stifled breathing ceased. With cold eyes the corporal rose and gently drew the blanket over his comrade's face.

"By God, that swine dies, too!" McCree growled as he flung out of the cabin. He came upon Burke and the Russian and hesitated, desire and discipline conflicting

with each other. "None of that, Andy; we're in the Mounted Police, remember!" he ordered, pushing Burke aside. "We'll deal with him in the proper manner. You listen to me, Burke. I am in command of this vessel!"

The other got up reluctantly and waited. "Kick over the engine, Andy, and take the wheel again. We must keep ahead of that other schooner. Everything depends on that."

BURKE said nothing but returned to the deck and put the vessel on her course. McCree went back to the cabin and set about the gruesome task of searching the dead man's pockets for letters and trinkets which his relatives might treasure. He also removed his uniform badges. This completed, he straightened out the body, wrapped it in a blanket, and with a heavy needle sewed up all that remained of Charlie Barton into a rough shroud.

Dawn was streaking the sky with faint colors when McCree left the deck and went back to the hold to find the Russian sitting as comfortably as his bonds would allow. The corporal examined his scalp wound, washed it clean and unlocked the handcuffs.

"Get up!" he ordered shortly but without heat. The Russian was humped on the bench before the table, holding his throbbing head in his hands. He did not look once at the shrouded figure in the bunk. "Now, Dorberg, I'm not going to waste any breath on you. If I did not wear the uniform I'd kill you with my bare hands, but you will be given a fair trial according to Canadian law when we get back to Fort Herschel. In the meantime you will be handcuffed—but not at present. We are going to use you. Get on deck!"

The Russian dragged himself up the companionway, but shrank back as he met Burke's eyes.

"Go on!" McCree shouted impatiently, prodding him in the back with his revolver muzzle.

The girl was on deck, too, white-faced and trembling. The corporal went straight to where she was standing.

"There's going to be shooting here shortly and you would be in the way. You must go below and stay there. Don't come on deck again unless I order you to do so. Otherwise I shall have to lock you in the cabin," he told her crisply.

SHE turned without a word and left him looking after her, a little surprised. He had expected opposition.

Several miles astern the Mountie made out the other schooner, on the same course as that of the *Aurora*. He whispered to Burke for a few moments, then turned to the Russian, motioning with his revolver.

"Now listen, Dorberg, and get it straight, or you may not live to be hanged in civilized style at Herschel. No matter what I tell you to do within the next hour, you do it. We know all about you and the trap you tried to lead us into. We're going to get that schooner, and then attend to the 'Mystery Ship' you were so kindly piloting us to."

The Russian glowered. He spoke no word, but hatred showed in every line of his face.

Then, to the amazement of the pirate, the two Mounties apparently went mad. Burke ran to the cabin, switched off the engine, and reappeared almost instantly with two of the service rifles, whose magazines he emptied in a fusillade of wild shots, fired to all points of the compass, while McCree danced and tore about the deck, howling and shouting at the top of his voice.

Both men presently flopped to the deck, McCree keeping his revolver on a level with the Russian's head. Burke was engaged in fitting the cartridge belt on the Colt gun.

The schooner, helmless, swung broadside to the current, and was carried slowly along.

"Now listen again, carefully, Dorberg," McCree addressed the prisoner. "You are supposed to have taken this ship, and we're dead. Get that? All right! You go ahead and haul that ensign up and down on the halyards as a sign that you have captured the schooner. Then stand right where you are and signal to the *Baikal* to close in. If you make the wrong signal you won't make a second one!"

The Russian carried out his orders, Within a second the two men saw the *Baikal* forge ahead, make a wide detour to inspect the patrol boat, and then apparently satisfied that the lone figure was

that of the comrade, head direct for the *Aurora*.

"Go ahead and signal!" snapped McCree, watching every move of the prisoner. The Russian waved his arms, and yelled something across the water. The corporal could see two men standing in the bows of the *Baikal* return the salute. The vessel closed in until they were less than fifty feet apart.

"Now, Burke!" McCree whispered.

ANDY came to his knees and the Colt was spitting a stream of lead across to the decks of the other boat. The man at the wheel let go and leaped backward, while the two in the bows gesticulated madly at Dorberg, but made no attempt to get to the cabin, where their arms would be stored. Between them and it was a barricade of screaming lead!

"Tell that man at the wheel to shut the engine off. Let him know he'll be in the Happy Land, pronto, if he is not back on deck in a second, too," McCree threatened.

Dorberg bellowed across the water in his own tongue, and Burke sent another dozen shots screaming over from the Colt gun, which gave the helmsman added speed. He dived down into the cabin, to reappear almost immediately, and went over to the others, all three standing with their hands above their heads as the *Baikal* drifted down on the *Aurora*.

"Tell them to come aboard now, one at a time. You translate the order and then hold out your hands, Dorberg. Taking no chances with you," the corporal ordered as Burke swung the patrol boat over.

Dorberg made a line fast to the *Baikal's* bowsprit. Kharkoff and another man stepped over the rail to be promptly handcuffed. As the third man came forward McCree bent a look of incredulous surprise on him. A cry of mingled fear and horror came from the girl, crouched in a corner, unnoticed until now by the men. It was the man who had been left for dead in the cave!

The corporal brought his eyes to rest upon the face of the girl. Was it possible that she was this man's? This foreigner with the uncouth figure, his unshaven face covered with coarse black hair, the greasy, ill-fitting clothes, the knotted hands and the clumsy sea boots? Such a "dock-rat" as one might run across any day on the wharves or in the dives of San Francisco or Seattle.

A wave of sheer physical disgust shook McCree.

## IV

THE morning sun was glinting over the forbidding cliffs, shining on the white sides of the two schooners lying motionless on the glassy sea. Aboard the *Awrora* the scarlet Canadian ensign hung limply at half-mast; the water lapped gently against the sides of the vessel.

Not a sound came from the little group of men standing with bared heads at the patrol boat's rail.

Suddenly Burke raised his revolver and swung the threatening muzzle toward the Russians.

"Look reverent, you swine!" he commanded through compressed lips. The foreigners bent their heads.

McCree tenderly raised the shrouded remains of Constable Barton from the deck to the ship's rail. Behind the corporal the girl stood with her face buried in her hands as the Mountie intoned the only prayer he knew. Then the thing that was Charlie Barton slid slowly off the rail. The sea received it with a swift splash. The eddying circles grew wider and wider.

Not trusting himself to look at McCree, Burke barked a curt order to the Russians to get below, watching them out of sight before he vaulted into the cabin. The silence was broken again by the chug-chug of the gas engine, and the *Aurora's* bow was pointed eastward once more on her quest.

An hour later, despite violent protestations on the part of the prisoners, they were landed on a small island with a month's supply of provisions and their handcuffs removed.

"Don't worry about us forgetting you!" Burke yelled in parting, as the patrol boat backed offshore. "We'll be back, all right, and you can count on being tried for murder and piracy on the high seas just as soon as we get you to Herschel—and if the sergeant-major doesn't detail me to pull on the rope I'll quit the damn police!"

Farther down the rocky coast the *Baikal* was run into a deep inlet and securely

fastened, fore and aft. On the vessel remained the girl stowaway, emphatically against her will, though McCree explained again and again the danger of proceeding farther.

AS the *Aurora* was cast off and dropped away over the widening water there flared one sentence, repeated again and again:

"Oh! I hate you! I hate you! I hate you!"

"What's biting that jane, anyhow? She has a nice warm cabin and plenty of grub. Say, Dickie, women are the devil and all to understand!" Burke volunteered.

McCree whirled on him, eyes flashing dangerously.

"Who the devil asked you for your opinion? Get below and start the engine!"

"Holy mackinaw! What's got into the old boy? Never saw him like that before," Burke grumbled to himself, as he went to the cabin and cranked the motor.

On deck McCree steered blindly down the narrow channel. The patrol boat swung crazily from port to starboard.

CORPORAL McCREE threw aside his telltale scarlet tunic, and, flattening his six feet of bone and sinew, carefully wormed his way to the crest of the cliffs that fringed the uncharted waters of Coronation Gulf.

With field-glasses he swept the ragged brown coast line below him. Sea birds wheeled in screaming circles. A school of walrus waddled down the shingled beach to disappear into their native element with roars of delight. Finally the Mountie picked up thin wisps of smoke from an Eskimo encampment close to the water's edge.

He moved to and fro impatiently, turning his eyes seaward to where the hot sun had drawn a mist from the sea-ice which still floated here and there in the frigid waters. Nothing but the glare of the white bergs through the fog greeted his anxious gaze.

He was about to crawl back from the brink of the cliff when an excited exclamation from his companion of "Quick! Look there!" caused him to wheel round. Following Burke's guiding finger, he raised the glasses again. As the fog lifted momentarily he could see, clearly outlined against the blanket of white mist, three masts and the black hull of a large vessel.

"That's the Mystery Ship right enough!" he whispered half aloud. Burke nodded. "Well, Andy, we're up against it in good shape. That ship must carry a big crew; it's out of the question to think of going back to Herschel for reinforcements, and there's nothing ahead but a thousand miles of desolate coast peopled by the savage hunters of the sea-ice."

Burke nodded again, a smile at the corners of his cheerful mouth.

The two lone men had the choice of a forlorn hope, forward, or a reasonable retreat in the face of overwhelming odds, but they gave it not an instant's thought. Their orders read, "You will continue the patrol until this matter is brought to a satisfactory conclusion."

"These rocks are as hard as army bread. Let's go back to the patrol boat and have a good sleep before we get killed," Andy suggested.

The corporal was in no mood for jocularity. He sensed the magnitude of the task confronting them, and as the constable proceeded to roll over comfortably on his back and hum, "Home, Sweet Home," McCree turned the glasses on the black hull and untidy rigging of the brig, in a vain endeavor to discover the identity of the strange ship.

"No use lying here," he grumbled to himself. "Come on, Andy, we'll get back to the boat and talk things over."

The two men wormed their way back from the cliff face, donned their uniforms, and hurried down the bare hillsides to the western side of Cape Krusenstern, where, tied to the rocks, was the trim white shape of the schooner.

McCree leaped to the deck and walked aft, where he paced to and fro, wrapped in thought. Knowing that he would say nothing until the matter had been threshed out in his mind, Burke went to the cabin and cooked the usual meal of beans and bannock, which the two ate in silence.

WHEN the meal was over and their pipes were going full blast, McCree completed the outlines of his plans.

"A great life," Burke commented. "Down on the plains we're cavalry; dog-

mushers and canoemen in the Territories; sailors in the Arctic; and now we're going to have a whirl at being pirates for a change. However, you're the skipper, so let's go."

Together they unscrewed the Colt from its mountings and stowed it below decks, smeared mud on the polished brasswork, and threw the neatly coiled ropes in disordered heaps, allowing the sheeted sails to trail the decks from the booms.

This done, they threw off their uniforms, climbed into greasy overalls and worn parkas. Then, with the corporal at the wheel, the once spick and span *Aurora,* now effectually disguised as the average trading craft, was chugging along under the power of her gas engine.

Rounding the sheer cliffs of Cape Krusenstern, the patrol boat forged steadily along, McCree steering directly for the strange ship, which lay about two miles off shore. As they closed in on her they noted her sides, scraped and slivered by the action of the ice, and the clutter of Eskimo skin boats tied to the rope ladder hanging over the bulwarks amidships.

On the vessel itself there was no sign of life, except for a faint curl of smoke from the galley chimney.

McCREE ran the patrol boat within fifty feet of the stranger's stern. A sudden ejaculation of surprise swept him in sheer astonishment, as his eyes picked out the battered white letters forming the words, "*Valhalla*—Reykjavik."

"By Jupiter, Dorberg wasn't lying, after all," he murmured, marveling still. "The *Valhalla* of Reykjavik in Iceland; the ship whose disappearance with her whole crew is still one of the mysteries discussed by sailors in the ports of Scandinavia!"

He recounted her history in his mind. On a voyage in ballast from Iceland to Franz Joseph Land to load a cargo of coal at the hills of the black fuel there the ship had disappeared. Then had come word of a strange craft sailing down the Greenland coast, robbing the Eskimo settlements in Danish territory. Again she had been lost track of, to reappear now in the Canadian Arctic, having battled a passage in the intervening two years through the ice floes of Hudson's straits and the unknown coasts of the Northwest Passage, and wantonly killing and pillaging on her way.

"But the Russians? How did they come to be in command of the vessel?" he asked himself. "Probably a raiding party from the White Sea, after the Soviet had risen to power." That seemed the logical conclusion. At any rate, they were on the ship.

The corporal's reverie was cut short by a shout from the *Valhalla* as a huge man lumbered to the raised poop deck, bawling across the water, "Ahoy there! What ship vas that?"

McCree, cupping his hands, roared back in a thick voice:

"*Aurora* of Herschel Island, Captain, What ship are you?"

Ignoring the question, the man on the brig howled some order in a foreign tongue. A moment later a score of heads appeared above the bulwarks, several of the men jerking rifles up on the rail.

"Shut off the engine, Andy," McCree called, and the *Aurora* drifted in closer on the other vessel.

An order from the big man boomed out again. From the *Valhalla's* well deck came a chorus of shouts, cries, and women's voices. McCree, from his long residence in the Arctic, well knew they came from Eskimos.

"Hey, you!" the Russian called. "How far to dis Herschel Island?"

"About eight hundred miles, Captain."

"Those Canada police there, eh?"

"Oh yes! Plenty of them."

"What you doin' here?"

"Trading with the natives," McCree yelled back, as he slumped at the wheel.

"Vell, you stheer off, see! Dis country trade vas all belong to us. You get out, see! Maybe you fellas get into trouble," he was informed by the captain of the *Valhalla.*

"Oh, we mind our own business, Captain. We'll keep away from your natives, all right," the corporal assured him. "We don't want any trouble."

He waved a hand in parting salute, the other answering by turning on his heel. Burke started the engine and in a few minutes the *Aurora* was out of earshot and making her way slowly toward Dease Straits.

For an hour McCree steered along the coast, then turned the schooner's bows for a river flowing from the north, and having

proceeded for a few miles up this stream the patrol boat was tied up once more.

"This is where someone gets it in the neck—probably us, from the looks of things," announced Burke cheerfully. The two men loaded themselves with packs of food and strapping on their revolver belts started to make their way back in the direction of the pirate ship and the Eskimo coast settlements they had passed during the morning.

## V

DORBERG, squatting gloomily on the shingled beach of his island prison, followed the retreating shapes of the two vessels with baleful eyes. His humor was by no means improved by the actions of Constable Andrew Burke, at the wheel of the police boat. As the schooners swung to the north and came abeam, Burke performed a rude dance of derision, completing the performance by rudely placing his fingers to his nose—a wholly unjustified action, and distinctly against the Regulations!

"Well, you made a fine mess of it, Dorberg!" growled Kharkoff, kicking savagely at the loose beach stones. "Got us all landed here, and then when these cursed Mounted Police come back you'll be hung and good enough—"

Aflame with sudden passion, Dorberg jerked himself to his feet, picked up a large stone and with a venomous gesture launched himself at the other.

"If I'm going to swing, I'll fix you before I go, you—" he roared, his English suddenly tapering off into a flood of Russian.

Kharkoff rose partially, but was hurled to the ground again as Dorberg flung himself at the man, the two rolling over and over down the sharply shelving beach, roaring blasphemies in their native tongue, hacking at each other, yelling insanely.

The two others stood back calmly and watched the fight. On the *Valhalla* they had witnessed many such scenes. "What if one or both of them get killed? So much the better; there will be more food for us!" they grinned at one another as the same thought struck them both.

Still rolling down the steep beach, arms whirling and legs kicking spasmodically in the endeavor to obtain a foothold on the slippery surface, the two men toppled over and plunged into the ice-cold waters of the Arctic. Involuntarily each loosened his grip, staggered to his feet, and suddenly forgetting the quarrel scrambled out of the frigid water.

Kharkoff turned and walked back to the other two.

"God! I'm freezing!" he muttered. "Look, we've got to hang together until this thing is over. No use fighting. That's foolishness. I'm going to make a fire and dry out."

Seizing a sharp stone he commenced to break up one of the boxes in which the Mounted Police had put their food supplies ashore, and in a few minutes had a tiny blaze mounting. The others wandered along the beach searching for driftwood, cast up by the current.

Then Kharkoff and Dorberg silently pulled off their soaked clothing and standing with blankets wrapped around them dried their garments at the fire, looking about them vacantly at the brown treeless hillsides, the green, ice-flecked water, and the low, distant coast—the barren, lifeless Arctic.

FOR half an hour they stood thus, the fire gradually bringing back life to their numbed tissues. But their blood ran cold again in a moment when from the crest of the ridge which crossed the island came an unearthly chorus of yells. These were followed by the figures of the two Russians careening madly down the hillside, slipping on the loose shingle, rolling over and over, and gaining their feet, only to fall once more.

"Kharkoff! Kharkoff! What was that?" Dorberg shouted, pointing a quivering finger at the three huge, dirty white shapes racing clumsily but speedily behind the fleeing men.

Kharkoff stared and his face went white. "Polar bears!" he whispered at length with lips which could scarcely frame the words.

Throwing his blanket aside in a sudden panic, he commenced to run back and forth like a lost child. But at once it came to him that there was nowhere to go!

Screaming their terror, the two hunted men reached the fire, behind which they crouched, making meaningless, threatening

gestures at the three bears, which stopped short on catching the scent of the burning wood.

Here was something the great animals had never met before; this strange thing with the red eyes and crackling noise. They paused, undecided, long snouts wrinkled, heads weaving from side to side, the piercing black eyes shifting ceaselessly from the men to the fire, and back again. Here was food; these strange upright animals could be killed—but then that spitting, snapping thing!

"God! They're awful brutes!" moaned Dorberg, looking up at last. "They're starved." He pointed to the gaunt sides of the big she-bear and shuddered at the anticipatory saliva which flowed from the animal's drooling jaws as the deep-set eyes took in the figure of the crouching man.

He leaped to his feet. "We've got to do something quick! They won't come near the fire. One of you men get some wood. We must have wood or they'll kill us all! You hear that! We must have wood!"

Kharkoff turned on him and spat out, "Get the wood yourself; you got us into this mess and it's up to you to get us out of it again!"

The others chorused assent.

Dorberg glanced wildly about him; at the bears trotting about them in wide circles; at the few pieces of driftwood scattered along the beach. He threw himself down and whined hopelessly.

Kharkoff said something in whispered Russian to the others. They nodded decisively. Then the three suddenly rushed at Dorberg, jerking the trembling man to his feet. He looked in their eyes and read the message there!

"Get the wood! Get the wood! Get the wood! You said it yourself!" Kharkoff repeated the phrase a dozen times in an insane frenzy. Aided by the others, he picked Dorberg up, carried him a few steps beyond the fire and threw him down.

THE man rolled over and over down the steep beach, but by a superhuman effort he stopped himself, got to his feet and commenced to scramble back toward the fire.

"Keep him off! Keep him off!" roared Kharkoff. Picking up a handful of sharp stones he commenced hurling them at the unfortunate man. The others, quick to copy the master mind, followed suit; a shower of flints whizzed through the air, striking Dorberg on the head and body.

The panic stricken Russian howled curses in his native tongue, pleaded, cajoled, threatened, but in the eyes of his comrades he saw no mercy. Still the showers of knife-edged rocks steadily ripped his flesh. At last, with a despairing cry, he turned and fled down the beach, falling and rising, only to fall again.

But the bears did not stumble! This was their native land. With clumsy fleetness they raced after the man. He turned to feel the animal's hot breath in his face, raised his hands appealingly and gave one last terrible cry. The great mother bear reared upward with a snort; one slash of the huge forearm and Dorberg tumbled in a heap.

The sailors at the campfire—hardened butchers of helpless Eskimos though they were—shuddered at the horrid noises coming from where the three dirty white backs bent and tore at the bloody thing on the ground. But through death they must live.

"Get the wood! Get the wood!" Kharkoff mouthed again and again. It was becoming a chant with him now.

While the bears made their bestial meal the three men raced back and forth in short runs, gathering such small pieces of wood as lay within reach.

IN a little while the bears rose, and squatting again licked their horribly stained fur. All three presently got up and padded forward silently with a peculiar swaying motion to where the Russians stood by the little fire. They circled the men slowly, coming closer and closer, finally all lying down flat to gaze with inquiring eyes at the fire. At times the younger animals slapped at one another with puppyish gestures. Each time they did so the old bear turned on them and growled. This was hunting, not play.

"More fires! More fires!" yelled Kharkoff suddenly coming out of a stupor of fear.

"Yes, yes!" agreed the other two. "Build many small fires and stand between them!"

The leader, heedless of agonizing burns, grabbed a flaming handful of sticks, and

advancing a few steps threw it down, adding fuel to it from the stock they had gathered. The other Russians copied him. In a minute they were surrounded by a circle of little fires which flamed up brightly.

"Fine! Fine! That's the idea!" they called to one another. But the happy looks on their faces froze almost instantly. In building the new fires they had used up all their meager supply of wood!

"Better get some wood, Kharkoff! You said it yourself! Go on, and get wood! Hurry now!"

The two advanced toward him, each taking his cue from the other. In their hard eyes he saw no mercy. He was to be the next sacrifice!

With a maniacal yell Kharkoff leaped out through the circle of dwindling fires and howling, "Get the wood! Get the wood!" floundered madly down the beach to plunge into the freezing Arctic with a despairing shout. The green waters closed over his head. Bubbles rose and gentle wavelets circled smoothly to lap the stones of the brown island.

THE three bears took scant notice of the tragedy. With eyes still fixed on the two men and the dwindling fires, they waited patiently. The cunning of the Arctic was in their minds. Battling always for an existence in this terrible wilderness, they knew from bitter experience all that a life of kill or be killed had to teach. They sensed that the man-animals were theirs.

The she-bear got up on her hind legs, sniffed, and drew closer. The fires were nothing but a flicker of small flames now.

The men could stand no more. With one accord they turned and fled up the beach, their frenzied cries echoing out over the bitter waters.

Once or twice the three bears looked at the retreating figures, but made no effort to follow. The killings could wait. But how about these curious smells? They sniffed and sniffed, drawing closer and closer. At last the old bear stepped daintily past the still glowing embers, and with one slap of a long-clawed forearm split open a large container of dried apples. The cubs followed suit, scattering the contents of the food supply with ecstatic grunts.

In a few minutes nothing remained but battered tins, torn bags and fragments of boxes.

Once again the old bear raised herself erect, whined, and turned along the beach in the direction taken by the two Russians. At her heels obediently trotted the cubs, heads weaving from side to side, long hair waving.

## VI

RANGED round the *Valhalla's* well deck were Eskimos' skin shelters, attached to the bulwarks with rawhide thongs. In front of the tents women and children were cooking fish and blubber over shallow stone cooking lamps. Howling huskie dogs were tied to the masts. In the waist a group of Eskimo men squatted, cutting up the carcass of a small white whale with their long knives. Ropes hung from the slewed yards in tangled festoons, and everywhere were the remains of fish scattered on the greasy decks, pieces of driftwood, bones and caribou horns.

Two men, reaching the brig from ashore, unconcernedly picked their way through this maze, going aft to where a group stood smoking on the poop.

"Well?" queried one in Russian. Obviously he was the leader, judging from his air of authority.

"Everything is all right, Captain. We won't have any trouble with that bunch." The big man grunted, and turning to one of the captured Icelandic crew ordered him to get the engines overhauled. "We're going out of here in the morning. Not enough wind to carry us through the straits. And you"—he gave his attention to the knot of men behind him—"get the big whaleboat lowered away and have these decks cleaned up. Quick, too!" He advanced menacingly upon the original crew of the brig, who moved rapidly out of range.

Captain Kuzin jerked his dirty sea-jacket up on his shoulders and motioned to a man nearby.

"Come below, Kichinski."

They descended the after companionway to the cabin. This was in keeping with the deck. Four bunks were set in the cabin walls, which were littered with clothing and bedding. The center table was covered with the remains of a meal on top of which was tossed a map and a sextant.

Five Eskimo girls, dressed in white fox skins, were squatted cross-legged on the floor sewing bead embroideries on sealskin boots. With the entrance of the Russians they rose to their feet, smiling good-naturedly.

"Throw them klootches out!" the captain ordered brusquely. Kichinski beckoned to the girls to leave. As they prepared to do so, one, apparently a favorite, playfully twisted her finger in a lock of shaggy hair which strayed over the mate's forehead. He flung her hand aside with a brutal gesture, at the same time dealing her a resounding smack on the cheek with his open palm. The girl stumbled and fell, carrying two others to the cabin floor with her.

Both men roared with laughter, as the girl, turning fearful eyes on the Russians, ran for the companionway.

"Well, Kichinski, things look as good here as they did in Greenland, eh?" the captain growled, reaching for a bottle and glasses from a shelf under the table.

"Fine, Captain," agreed the other. "You're leaving for Admiralty Island in the morning?"

"Yes, Ivan. Here's the way I have it planned. We have about a hundred of these Eskimos on board now, and with the gang coming tonight we'll have plenty of hunters. Victoria Land is the best white fox country in the Arctic, these natives here say, and there's thousands of caribou as well."

"I'm going to turn the Eskimos loose with enough poison to get every white fox that runs on four legs. We'll be able to buy all the vodka in Siberia, Mister Mate! Good old vodka, hein? That's a man's drink—strong waters for we strong men of the north, eh? No trouble to get these deer, either. All you have to do is to send the hunters into the herds and kill till you're sick of it. While the Eskimos are poisoning the foxes I'll put these Icelanders to work killing the caribou and loading them on the ship. We have plenty of cargo space left, and we can sell the meat to the native settlements on our way down to Vladivostok. When we're through with this Canadian coast, we'll clean up the Alaskan mission stations on our way south. Not missing much, eh?"

"Sure, Captain; that's fine. I'm getting suspicious of these Icelanders, though. Petroff says they talk a lot amongst themselves now. Not a bad idea to show them who is running this ship, Captain?"

"Yes," Kuzin agreed thoughtfully. "That fellow, Ingstrom, is trying to stir up some trouble maybe. He has too much to say. Might as well use him to frighten the rest of them. We need them now to get these caribou—after that, who knows?" He made a significant gesture toward the frigid waters lapping the side of the vessel.

KICHINSKI reached for the bottle, nodding grimly.

"How about going ashore for those Eskimos now, Captain? We should be all clear to pull out of here at daylight."

"All right; pass that bottle and reach down that whip." The mate handed over a heavily thonged knout with a loaded handle. The captain arose and followed by the other lumbered up the companionway to the deck. There they saw that the crew had the whaleboat in the water and were engaged in clearing up the decks.

With Kichinski trailing behind, the captain strode to the well deck and proceeded to exact discipline by bringing the stinging knout down across the shoulders of any Eskimos within reach—man, woman or child.

Kuzin walked over to where three of the Icelanders were struggling with the greasy remains of the white whale in an effort to raise it to the edge of the bulwarks to throw it over.

"Get under it! Get under it!" the captain bellowed, advancing upon the struggling men. Nervous at his menacing presence, the men fumbled with the slippery thing, raised it almost to the top of the bulwarks, when it slid back to the deck again.

With an infuriated roar the watching man sprang at them, bringing down his knout with resounding blows. All eyes were turned to the three, who made no effort to get away, merely shielding their heads with their arms, as the cruel lash fell again and again. The man Ingstrom, with more spirit than the rest, took a step toward the captain in a fruitless effort to explain.

"No chat from you, Scandinavian fish-eater. I'll show you who is master aboard this craft!" Reversing the knout, the captain brought the loaded stock down crush-

ingly on the Icelander's unprotected head.

"Over with him!" Kuzin roared, tossing the whip to Kichinski, who forced a group of the Eskimo men to toss the insensible Icelander over the rail. Then, as if nothing out of the usual had happened, the mate bellowed "Man the whaleboat!" the terrified Icelanders rushing to obey his order.

Within a few hours the sound of oars brought the captain to the railing of the poop deck, where he looked down to see the whaleboat passing under the *Valhalla's* stern. The boat was loaded with white fox skins, on top of which squatted a number of Eskimo women and children, with men in their kayaks paddling behind.

DELIGHT gleamed in the natives' eyes as they wandered about the ship's decks. They laughed and talked loudly, chattering excitedly as the vessel's cook came forward with a concoction of boiled rice and currants, ladling a stiff ball of the pudding into the outstretched hands.

"Bring the stuff!" Kuzin ordered as he noted the effect of the gift. In a minute the cook was back with a large pot of highly sweetened liquid and a tin cup. Purposely helping the men first, he gave each a mugful of the drink. Those served presently squatted on the deck, swaying a little as if from dizziness. Finally they lay down, and in less than ten minutes the whole band was helpless in the power of the drug.

"That'll fix them for twenty-four hours," grunted the captain. "Heave up the whaleboat, Mister Mate, and clear away to sail at daylight."

IT was still dark when the Icelanders were routed out of the fo'castle and put to work on the capstan. Presently, with Kichinski at the wheel, the heavy gas engine was awakening the echoes, and the mate spun the *Valhalla's* bows for Admiralty Island and the plunder which was to fill her holds to overflowing.

With dawn creeping over the brown hills the Russian took his bearings from the compass. He glanced indifferently at the prostrate bodies on the well deck. Sweeping the shore line with a casual glance, he chuckled on seeing the little cluster of ravaged skin shelters on the bay, which would stand neglected until the Arctic storms carried them away. Doubtless his merriment would have been less hearty had he noted, on a distant point, a uniformed figure carefully observing every movement on the ship through a field-glass.

What he did not know, also, was that lying on the deck amongst the Eskimos was one man to whom the skin garments were new. Seemingly unconscious from the drug, at that moment Constable Andrew Burke's round face was peering cautiously over the hood of his parka!

## VII

THE corporal lay for an hour on the brink of the cliff watching the slattern yards of the *Valhalla* gradually fading into the east. The ship moved slowly. He was puzzled at this, knowing how she was engined. Then he remembered the years the vessel had been at sea, and how by now her wooden hull would be covered with a thick marine growth of weeds and shellfish life.

"It will take her at least three days to make it through the Gulf and Dease straits to Admiralty Island," he reflected. "In the meantime there's nothing for me to do but lie around."

McCree loathed idleness; he was never happy unless moving fast. He rolled over on his back, staring up into the cloudless blue vault of heaven under the shade of his broad-leafed Stetson.

"Whiskers on the moon!" he laughed to himself, using one of Burke's assorted exclamations. "I've heard of that, but this thing of curls on the sun is something new!" But curls there were, inviting little fluffy twists, meant expressly for twining about a forefinger. Big, long-lashed brown eyes looked down at him. There was a divine pout on the sun's rosy lips.

He got up, shook himself, and straightened his uniform. The *Valhalla* was out of sight. Nothing met his eyes now but one brown rock cape jutting beyond another; a few bergs glinting under the sun's rays; the circling gulls.

"Well, why not?" the thought came to him. Perhaps the girl might be terrified at her loneliness. He had time at his disposal now to talk to her—and alone; to settle once and for all what her mission was, and her relationship to these uncouth foreigners. He might have misjudged her.

"Anyhow, I'll make her say 'I hate you! I hate you! I hate you!' again," the corporal chuckled to himself, his fancy drinking in the picture of the small figure tensed, the flashing eyes, and the emphatic foot stamping—stamping—stamping.

In an hour he was back on the schooner and chugging off to the west. That evening he swung the *Aurora's* bows up the rocky estuary, unconsciously giving his service hat a rather more rakish tilt, tugging his uniform down, and peering eagerly ahead.

His eyes widened. He rubbed them to make sure the vision was not defective. No! He was not blind. There, clear and distinct, were the red rocks, the shingled beach, and the brown hills—but the *Baikal* was gone!

"DARN it all, McCree let me into a nice mess doing the Eskimo act aboard this cursed wind-jammer!" Burke muttered to himself, as he strode up and down the cluttered deck. "Here I am as helpless as a monkey without a tail. Might just as well be back playing poker with the lads at Herschel as wasting my valuable time wandering up and down, looking like the Wild Man from—"

The constable's train of thought was suddenly interrupted. From the direction of the cabin came a succession of heart-rending woman's screams. He wheeled about involuntarily and gazed about the crowded pirate ship—at the heedless Eskimos; at the black-visaged Icelanders coiling ropes and throwing rubbish overboard.

"Hell! I've just about had enough of this watching and waiting business. Constable Andrew Burke, regimental number 786, kiss yourself good-bye!" Before he well realized what he was doing, he had reached the door of the cabin.

Another scream welled up, and the Mountie was out of sight.

He took the short flight of steps at one bound. The scene in the cabin seared itself on his brain. In the far corner three Eskimo girls clung to one another, staring with fearful eyes to where Kichinski was forcing another maiden into the waiting arms of the captain. The message she read in his loathsome gaze penetrated even to the dull consciousness of the Eskimo woman. With all her strength she resisted him, struggling uselessly.

Burke launched himself through the air with a catapult-like spring. Disdaining all the ethics of civilized warfare, he rammed one knee hard into Kuzin's stomach, and reached the floor astride the Russian, sending in blow after blow.

"You black chimpanzee—*smack! smack!* —Want jungle scrapping, eh? —*cr-ack!*— All right—here's a cavalry wallop—*smack!* —you foul—"

The constable's Irish blood ran away with his caution. He forgot all else but the punishment due this brute about whose thick throat his fingers were digging deep into the ugly flesh.

Sensing that assistance would come, Kuzin clung to Burke, suffering the blows which crashed into his face. Kichinski rushed forward, throwing aside the table to kick savagely with his heavy sea boots. In less than a moment the Mountie was stretched on the cabin floor, a mangled mass.

The Eskimo girls fled in a mad frenzy, falling over each other in their flight. Kichinski took no notice of them whatever. He bent all his energies toward reviving his chief, pouring the raw Danish whisky down his throat, bathing his head with cold water.

At last Kuzin sat up dazedly—a red-eyed disgust—feeling his battered lips and stinging neck. Blubbering thickly through his puffed lips, he pointed to Burke.

"Kill that swine—and the girl, too!"

The mate reached for his seaman's knife.

"No, not that, you fool! Too quick! Throw them both overboard!"

He took no further interest in the matter or in anything else, except to gulp another mouthful of whisky and fling himself down on his bunk, moaning.

Kichinski lumbered out, returning to the cabin shortly with two Icelanders, who at a sharp command from the mate carried the still unconscious constable up the steep stairway. They laid him down near the gunwhale.

"Bring that girl Natook!" the mate roared into the gloom of the well deck. Struggling and screaming, the Eskimo girl was dragged to the rail beside the Mountie.

"Come on there! What d'ya think this is—a party? Over with 'em!"

Kichinski stood behind the sailors watching the four men bend to their task. The limp body of the constable was raised to

the rail to roll over and disappear, with the girl immediately behind him, fighting to the last.

All five men craned their heads overboard to listen for the telltale splash of the icy water.

Not a sound came!

## VIII

MOLLY VERNON sat huddled on the cabin floor, brimming eyes staring hopelessly at the black bulk of the silent engine. "You've got to go! You've just got to!" Grasping the crank handle she put all her frail strength into a final effort. Nothing came but a sucking sound from the mass of cold steel.

She sank back on the cabin floor, nursing her bruised hands.

"Oh! Why did I ever do it?" she moaned despairingly. "The schooner is adrift, a thousand miles from the nearest white outpost. Oh! how foolish I was!" The girl sprang to her feet, eyes wide. "Am I going insane? Is this madness, or—"

She raced to the deck, and with the binoculars swept the surface of the Arctic, her body trembling with excitement.

"It was a shout! It was a shout!" Silent lips framed the words as her straining eyes picked up two fur-clad figures on an ice-pan scarcely large enough to hold them. They were waving frantically.

She ran to the stern, pulled the schooner's canoe alongside, and lowering herself carefully into the little craft paddled toward the figures on the ice-pan.

Her eyes widened; the paddle nearly slid from her fingers. Standing on the fragment of floating ice was Constable Burke, and beside him a young Eskimo woman.

Molly caught her breath excitedly. Her questions tumbled over each other.

"What is the meaning of all this? However did you get there? Where is Corporal McCree? Has anything happened to him? Tell me at once!"

Burke gripped the canoe, lifted the Eskimo girl aboard, slid in himself and turned to Molly Vernon.

"Got any beans?" he asked. "Say, Natook and I are hungry enough to eat our moccasins! McCree? Oh! Dick's all right, I guess. Couldn't hurt that son of a gun with an ax!"

The girl stamped her foot. Burke laughed again, took the paddle and set out for the schooner.

"How did we get on the ice-pan? Easy as kiss your hand! Russians threw us off the *Valhalla* and we landed kerplunk on the darned thing. Just happened to be sliding past. Say, when I get back to Des Moines, I'll never say 'No' to an ice-man again. Great respect for the stuff now. Would have passed out, though, but for this little girl. Great kid!"

Natook glanced from one to the other in her endeavor to understand their expressions as they talked. She returned Molly's sympathetic smile with suspicious eyes, holding tight to Burke's parka with a gesture which plainly read: "This is my man! You leave him alone!"

Andy pushed back his plate regretfully.

"Now we'll tangle with this won't-work engine and hit back for the shore," he decided. "The corporal is somewhere back there watching for the *Valhalla*."

THE girl's face brightened at this casual mention of McCree. Her heart was singing a little song of: "Dick is here! Dick is here!" With a happy tune on her lips she climbed the short steps to the deck—to be gripped by a pair of huge, hairy hands!

Screaming, struggling, she cried to Burke for help.

"Yell away, little one. That's the way the Captain likes 'em. So you're the young lady from the United States, eh? Pretty too. If old Kuzin doesn't want you, perhaps I'll keep you myself. Hein?"

As her head jerked level with his shoulder she saw Burke behind them. Then, thundering across the *Baikal's* deck, the heavy tramp of the pirates' sea-boots.

Alongside was one of the brig's whaleboats crowded with men. Beyond a distant point showed the slatternly yards of the Russian ship.

Kichinski doubled with laughter. "So you brought the *Baikal* back alone, eh? But Dorberg, Kharkoff and the others, what of them? You don't know? Well, we'll make you talk! And your friend here is not an Eskimo after all? Swears pretty near good enough for a sailor! And he and Natook are going back to the *Valhalla*

too. Himmel! But we'll have fine sport aboard the ship tonight!"

The whaleboat pushed off. Oars splashed as she threaded her way in and out through the ice-pan, carrying her prisoners to their fate.

WEIGHTED down with his camp equipment, ammunition, and extra service revolver, Corporal McCree made slow progress over the rolling brown hills and through the deep valleys still carpeted with snow on the sheltered slopes.

Day after day he passed through the caribou herds feeding on the mosses and lichens. Gentle creatures these deer were, staring at him with timid eyes. There were uncounted thousands—a shifting, softly colored brown mass covering the whole face of the country.

"These Russians had it well planned out, all right," McCree told himself as he dwelt upon the ease with which they could fill the holds of their vessel. "Well they won't do it—unless they get me first."

The corporal knew he must be approaching Admiralty Bay from the time he had taken in the crossing of Victoria Land. He proceeded more cautiously now, and upon making each succeeding hill, wormed his way slowly to the crest, peering out over the next valley before rising to his feet again.

On the fourth morning, after he had traveled several hours, he crawled carefully to the top of a hill and elevated his head above the abrupt crest.

"Great guns!" Surprise sucked his breath in between his teeth like a rusty whistle.

He had reached the pirates' meeting place at last!

From the hill top the ground sloped gently to the peaceful sea, against which the *Valhalla's* masts and spars were thrown up in keen relief. On the sides of the hills the herds of caribou moved about, occasionally lifting their antlered heads to gaze and scent at this new odor invading their pastures.

"Hell's delights! So that's the idea, is it?" the Mountie queried explosively as he witnessed the actions of the toiling men strung along the hills. "They're going to build two long walls of loose stones to the ship, and then drive the caribou down to the killing place near the vessel. Of course, these deer have never seen a barrier of any kind and will naturally trot calmly down to the butchery!" The enormity of the thing held him breathless.

The corporal commenced an unhurried inspection through the glasses of the scene. Some of the Eskimo faces in the nearest working party he knew, but although he went up and down the line time and again, in search of the short figure and jovial face of his comrade, he could not find him.

"Wonder if they've got Andy? He's a reckless devil, anyhow, and may have got himself into some jackpot or another. Perhaps I should not have let him go; I sure need the old boy now," he thought.

He shook off the feeling of uneasiness and crept down the hill. He worked his way along the lower slopes until he came to the head of the wide valley, where the out-flung wings of the wall commenced.

For an hour the corporal lay watching with as much patience as he could summon. He kept his eyes fixed on the nearest Eskimo party as it drew nearer and nearer.

Satisfied, at last, he rose to his knees, cupped his mouth with his hands and three times gave the long, low hunting call of the Innuits.

The Eskimos dropped their stones, staring wildly about them.

"I've got to risk everything now!" McCree muttered, whipping off his scarlet tunic and holding it so that it was in plain sight of the natives. In a low, penetrating voice he called to them:

"Behold the Red Coats come to free the People of the Ice. Let one only advance slowly, the others performing their tasks. You, Innitok! Come to me slowly, creeping upon thy belly as does the white fox! Slowly now, slowly!"

The Eskimos turned to one another.

"Behold the Red Coats never lie," they muttered. "Here is one of the Very Strong Men! He comes from the Great White King to take us from these men. It is well. Let Innitok go forward."

In a minute the native was around the corner of the hill and out of sight. A little whisper of dispelled breaths came from the watching men.

McCree wasted no time.

"You did well, Innitok. Now tell of this

thing. Speak of these strange men from the Far Country, telling all."

For more than an hour the Eskimo talked with the corporal, and listening, McCree formed his plans.

"It's a desperate chance," he thought, "but I'll have to take it. It means relying on these natives and the Icelanders when the time comes to strike, and they may fail me. However, there's no other way out."

"Listen, Innitok!" He explained his plan of action to the native in detail, going over it several times. Then he made the Eskimo repeat it word for word, impressing on him the necessity for getting his message broadcast to both his own race and the captured crew of the *Valhalla*.

"Great Master! Have I not driven dogs for the Mounted Police? Do I not speak some words of your tongue? It is well. Innitok is no child!"

Again the Eskimo flattened himself upon the ground and wriggled back to his comrades, unobserved, as McCree thought.

## IX

DUSK was clothing the gaunt hills with purple shadows, softening the glare of the ice-pans, blotting out the tapering masts of the pirate ship.

At a shrill whistle from the *Valhalla* the groups of men dotting the hillside obediently commenced to straggle back to the ship. The day's work was done.

Hearing the call Captain Kuzin lumbered up from the cabin, a hard look coming into his eyes as he glimpsed Molly Vernon pacing to and fro on the starboard side of the poop deck. He lumbered across the deck, crossed in front of the girl and blocked her way.

"So you don't like me, little spitfire, eh? That's all right; stamp that foot again. I like it. But I am going to make you do what I want, see? You are not the first girl to learn that from Captain Kuzin in the cabin of the *Valhalla*." He laughed evilly, reaching for her. "Kiss me, little gir—"

"You loathsome beast!" Fiercely she wrenched herself from his surprised grasp, racing blindly across the deck, Kuzin at her heels, cursing, reaching, just missing her every time.

Hearing the captain's bellows of rage, Kichinski darted from his cabin to aid in the pursuit. He stumbled over an outthrust foot and fell to the deck with a crash.

Clinging to his throat, Burke struck him blow after blow over the head with an iron belaying pin.

The mate lay still. Andy did not wait to find out whether he was alive or dead, but followed the flying figures of Kuzin and the girl to the shore.

THE girl raced straight for the hillside, Kuzin close behind her. Several of his men sprang forward to stop her.

"Keep away! Keep away, you—" the captain howled. "I'll catch that woman myself. None of you touch her. Stand off!"

Molly Vernon prayed wildly as she sped along. She could not hold out much longer. Already her speed was slackening. She was weak and her labored breathing was agony.

"Oh! God!" she groaned, her knees giving way. "The sea! the sea!" There was a refuge. She turned for the cold, green water, stumbled, fell, came to her knees and put a hand dazedly to her head.

Two spurts of flame almost blinded her. From behind came a muffled groan.

McCree jumped across Kuzin's lifeless body and raced headlong down the slope calling "Areah! Areah!"—the hunting call of the Innuits.

"The Red Coats have come! The Red Coats have come!" howled the waiting Eskimos, leaping and gesticulating in a frenzy of delight, as the lone Mountie tore forward—one against scores.

With Innitok's message still ringing in their ears the natives seized the sharp stones from the walls and hurled themselves on the Russians.

Dozens fell under the pirates' revolver shots, but in a second the gaps in the ranks were filled again.

INTO the battle went the Icelanders howling the age-old sagas of their native isle. This was the hour for which they had hoped and prayed.

They tore at the Russians with horrible savagery. McCree saw one Icelandic giant grasp one of the pirates by the heels, and dash his head against the stone wall.

"Hey! Dick! Gimme a gun! Quick!" panted Burke at the corporal's elbow. Without speaking McCree jerked a revolver out of the second holster.

Shoulder to shoulder they made for the thick of the fight, picking out the armed Russians, shooting them down without mercy. There was little for them to do, however. The long pent-up fury of the *Valhalla's* crew was let loose upon the pirates like a flaming tidal wave.

"No use trying to stop the killing, Andy; let them go to it. But great Heavens, it's sickening!" McCree turned on his heel in disgust.

"Stop them? Not me!" ejaculated Andy. "Go to it, boys! Here comes the Irish Brigade!"

"Cut that out, Andy! That's orders, yes! Let those screaming maniacs finish the business. We're police and we still have work to do. You go down and take charge of the ship. We may have trouble handling the men after this is over. See that they don't get to the cabin where the liquor is stored. The Eskimos will be wanting to stage one of their dances tonight, so I guess we won't be able to get away until the morning. Get the Icelanders to work putting the ship in shape for sea. I'm going up for Miss Vernon."

The constable watched him go, a quizzical smile about his wide mouth.

"By cripes, those two give me a severe pain. We'll each of us draw about twenty thousand dollars for grabbing this windjammer. We've had a nice little vacation on full pay and young Cupid's plugged our hides full of arrows! Hell—they're crazy!" Burke turned to where the remaining Russians were running for their lives. "Sic 'em, Towser!"

McCREE went slowly up the hill.

"Miss Vernon," he began without looking at the girl, "I want you to understand that I have no personal interest in the matter, but as a Mounted Policeman I must ask you now for a detailed statement of your reasons for being in the Arctic. I must remind you that you are under arrest unless you do so."

Molly Vernon had been waiting, but not for this! She flushed, came to her feet suddenly, and faced him heatedly.

"I won't be bullied! I will tell you nothing!" A sudden gust of misery shook her.

Something in her voice, something in her deep eyes—of hurt and truth—whipped his blood to fierce action. Before he realized what he was doing she was in his arms and he was whispering passionately, "I love you, Molly! I love you in spite of everything—even of the past!"

Molly Vernon lifted her head quickly. A hint of laughter dawned in her eyes.

"You mean that I really did not—not—belong to Dorberg. And you want me anyway? You love me like that?"

McCree nodded, drawing her closer, but she held him back.

"Dick," she said gravely, "because you are big enough to want me in the face of all that, I'd like to tell you the truth. First of all I came up from Seattle on the Hudson Bay's steamer to teach the Eskimo children at the Aklavik mission. Then—" she shivered, her hands tightening about his. "I was wandering about the island, waiting for the mission schooner, and I was captured by those Russians. They were taking me away to their ship when you saved me from that—and I—I loved you, Dick, almost from that moment. Oh! stop, Dickie; let me finish! I knew you would be in danger on the patrol boat so I made up my mind that I would go with you and share the danger. Of course, I went away on the *Baikal* because I hated you then—but I don't hate you quite so much now! There!"

McCree lifted her chin with one finger. Their lips met.

From all about them came the gentle stepping of the caribou in the darkness. Lights glimmered faintly on the *Valhalla;* shouts and laughter echoed out across the Arctic waters.

The bizarre music of an Icelander's accordion came to them on the still air, accompanied by the monotonous thudding of the Eskimos' tom-toms.

Molly crept closer into the Mountie's arms.

"What a funny noise," she whispered, smiling a little. McCree smiled too, looking down into her face.

"The wedding march of the Mounted Police, little sweetheart," he said, "played by the drums of the Frozen Sea."

# Outlaw of the Snows

By H. S. M. KEMP

**"Save your own skin first!"—that's the prime rule of the Northland. But square-shooting Billy Nelson, fugitive from Redcoat law, turned his back on the freedom trail—only to learn that gratitude never swerves a Mountie!**

BILLY NELSON, tall, square-rigged and twenty-four, pulled his six gray and white huskies to a stop before the general store at Jackpot, and strode inside. At the rear was a door leading into a two-by-four office. It was marked "Private." Nelson shoved open the door without knocking and closed it gently behind him.

The thick-set, slack-mouthed man at the desk turned his head. He nodded a short greeting.

"All set?"

Nelson did not answer at once. He lounged over against the wall near the stove. Drawing a package of tobacco from a pocket inside his hairy parka, he began rolling a cigaret. Not until he lighted it and flicked away the match, did he speak.

"Don't know, Jeff. Maybe. I've quit."

"What?"

The slack-mouthed one turned around abruptly.

Nelson smiled casually. "I've got the mail contract to Sturgeon Portage. Starts in a month. That'll take all my time."

"Good night!" The other, Jeff, digested this. Then: "Any money in it?"

"Hundred a month."

Jeff smiled indulgently. "And yuh mean t' say yuh figure on quittin' me fer that blamed job? Th' way it is now I pay yuh seventy-five a trip, and two trips a month is easy fer yuh."

Nelson returned the smile.

"Sure." He lowered his voice. "But a hundred per for Government work is a bit easier on the nerves than running booze to the Indians at a hundred and fifty."

Jeff grunted. "Cold feet?"

"Cut that!" The other's blue eyes turned to chilly gray. "No. Fact is, I'm getting married, and the two don't gee. Peggy knows that I've been crowded once and got off with a fine. She's game enough to overlook that, since she thinks I'm running straight now. Anyway, it's a lousy business, this booze game, and I don't need the money any longer. I've enough to quit."

Jeff cackled mirthlessly.

"Th' game was fine when yuh needed th' money. Now that yuh've got what yuh needed, it's rotten, eh? Pretty good," he sneered.

Nelson looked at him coldly, his lips a thin line. As he leaned against the wall he did not look what he was, a booze-runner to the natives. There was nothing of the degenerate about him; his face was too open and frank. Rather was it the face of a boy, keen for adventure and excitement.

"And what about me?" Suddenly Jeff altered his tone. "Ain't yuh lettin' me down a bit? Here I got ten dozen all packed and ready for Bud Jackson up at th' gold camp, and yuh quit. I've treated yuh square, Billy, and it seems like yuh're doin' me dirt.'

For an instant a look of indecision came into the eyes of the other. Jeff saw it. He struck while the iron was hot.

"O' course, it's up t' yuh. If yuh're bound t' quit, yuh will. But th' least yuh c'd have done was t' give me th' chance t' find another man. Go one more trip fer me, Billy, and I'll raise the ante to eighty bucks."

" 'Tisn't that," came back Nelson, hastily. "I'm not gold-digging, but I just naturally want to quit. The booze'll have to go."

"But jest this trip," wheedled Jeff.

For a moment there was silence. Nelson looked down, tracing a pattern on the floor with the toe of his elaborately embroidered moccasin, a frown beneath the heavy otter-skin cap he wore.

"Yuh got all kinds o' time," put in the tempter. "Yuh'll be back in ten days, and yuh say th' mail job is a month yet."

Nelson looked up, still frowning.

"All right," he said shortly. "Just this once. But for the next trip, find somebody else."

AN hour later he made up his load. On his big, flat oak sleigh he piled four hundred pounds of freight and liquor, grub and his blankets. When everything was packed in snugly, he drew the canvas cover up and lashed the whole firmly to the sleigh.

But before he started he had one more mission. He walked to a cottage a few feet back from the main road, knocked on the door, and stepped inside.

A girl seemed to be expecting him. The top of her curly, bobbed head barely came to his shoulder, a dainty little thing, dark-eyed and glowing.

"All ready to start, Billy? There's a cup of tea waiting and a piece of pie. You may as well spare the ten minutes and eat it."

The man looked at her, and then thought of the load on his sleigh. Peggy—and booze! Some combination! If she knew the kind of man he really was, she'd drop him so quick he'd bounce. And here he was, living to her a black-faced lie. Instead of supplies, he was hauling the rot-gut stuff that turned men into beasts. But after this trip. . . .

"Here you are!"

Peggy's voice shattered his self-reproach. She slid a chair forward and he sat down.

A few minutes later, ready to leave, he stood at the door, one hand on the latch, the other around her shoulder.

"Don't stay longer than you can help, Billy, will you? Ten days is a short time for you on the trail, but for me in the village it's years!"

He laughed softly. "Not longer than I can help. One trip to the gold fields—my

first trip with the mail—then wedding bells for two!"

And he bent over and kissed her full on her smiling lips.

TWO days away, and fifty miles from Jackpot, Nelson came to a fork in the road. The junction was in a big muskeg of stunted spruce and withered tamaracks. To the north, still a hundred miles away, were the outposts to which he was heading. Due east, fifty miles distant, was the railroad construction camp at Mile 341 . . . and Bliss.

Nelson did not care to think too much about Bliss. The freckle-faced, lanky corporal of the Red Coats knew a thing or two. He knew, for instance, that Nelson had been convicted a year before for booze-running. The policeman had not since checked him up, but Nelson felt sure that if the corporal ever met him on the trail he would search his load.

Against this, Nelson trusted in two things: one was luck, and the other was the speed of his dogs. He had great faith in his dogs. Few trains there were in the north that could touch his six snarling cross-bred wolves in a straight race or in an endurance test.

Suddenly, from his leader came a whine, and the six hit forward at a faster clip. Like a deer at a water hole, the man suddenly grew alert. He jumped for the tail of the toboggan. He dragged his foot in the deep snow at the side of the trail and pulled the dogs down to a walk.

"Whoa!" he called softly. Obediently they stopped, the leader still whining with eagerness. Nelson walked up to him and gave the command to lie down. Then, very cautiously, he moved ahead.

For fifty yards he crept. Then he caught the sharp smell of wood smoke. Undoubtedly someone was boiling his noonday kettle, Nelson decided. Then ahead of him, a dog barked. An answering bark came from one of his own team.

"Spike, dang ye! Shut up!" a man shouted.

Nelson sighed with vast relief. The voice was that of old Pete Findlay, a trapper he had known for years.

He moved forward, reassured. A twist in the trail brought him on a camp-fire and a string of snarling dogs.

"Hey, Pete!" he called, and Findlay turned swiftly.

"Billy!" and then to his leader: "Spike, ye devil! I'll brain ye!"

Nelson turned and whistled shrilly, and soon his own train came tearing down the trail. For some minutes he had his hands full to preserve the peace between his dogs and Findlay's. But at length he unlashed his grub box and carried it to the fire.

"Goin' to boil with me, Bill?" queried the old trapper.

"Sure; and keep good company for once," was the grinning reply.

Findlay looked at him keenly from under the white tufts of his eyebrows. He did not speak until later, when, hunched up in his parka, Billy waited for his kettle to boil.

"Still runnin' fer Stokes?"

The younger man nodded. Findlay lifted his cup, shaking his head.

"Ye're a danged fool, Billy. So far, ye've got by, but there's a twist to every trail."

Nelson grinned, half-ashamed.

"But until then . . .? Anyway, this is my last trip. Going on the mail run to Sturgeon Portage next month."

"Yeh?" Genuine pleasure shone in the old man's eyes. "Glad to hear of it. Ye're not th' kind of boy, Billy, to be doin' Stokes' dirty work fer him, and ye'll thank th' day ye quit him." He set down his cup. "Hear, too, ye're gettin' married. Yeh? She's a fine little lady. If ye quit this booze game, I'll congratulate the both of ye!"

Nelson grinned his thanks and commenced to eat.

"But there's one thing," continued the trapper. "They're expecting Bliss up at th' gold fields. He's due on patrol. So if ye've got anything ye want t' get rid of, step on 'er!"

"So?" Nelson's eyes widened with surprised interest. "In that case I will. Thanks for the tip."

He laughed it off, but the laugh was a trifle strained.

For the next few minutes there was a near silence, save for a pop from the fire and an occasional word from old Findlay. In that interval Nelson finished his meal.

He pitched his used dishes into the

grub box and loaded the box onto his sleigh. After feeding his dogs a scrap of dried fish, he went back to the carpet of boughs by the fire and began rolling a cigaret.

Suddenly, from one of the dogs came a mouthy growl, answered immediately by a clamor of barking from the two trains. Nelson went suddenly tense. The half-made cigaret crumpled in his fingers. Something told him that danger was behind him. Slowly he turned around. His face suddenly went pale. For, standing in the trail, fur-coated and armed, was Bliss.

NELSON'S jaw set hard. For a moment he fought for his composure. Then, getting himself in hand, he smiled easily.

"'Lo, Corp!" he called. "Didn't expect to see you here."

The policeman did not return the smile.

"Let's have a look at your load, Bill," he said shortly.

Nelson ventured a bluff.

"My load! What d'you mean?"

"Doesn't matter," was the curt response. "Stay where you are!"

He came forward to Nelson's sleigh and commenced to loose the lashings.

For a moment Billy was tempted to stake all in one swift rush. But the chilly sight of Bliss' service revolver in its holster checked the impulse. Half-hypnotized, he stood and watched the other's actions.

He saw him spread open the cover, toss the bedding to one side, and then lift and shake each case. At one he bent his head, listening closely while he shook it. Then, with his eyes fixed warily on the two at the fire, he picked up an axe and began to pry off the lid.

There was a creaking as the nails drew out, the rustle of straw. Bliss grunted in satisfaction as his eye fell on the top layer of two dozen bottles of bootleg whiskey.

"So you're still at it, eh?"

The policeman's voice was strangely quiet, but strangely threatening. Nelson's heart began to pound madly. The future flashed before him—jail, he a convict . . . and Peggy.

And who was to blame? Himself, yes, but what of Jeff, the devil behind it all? He ground his teeth, cursing himself for a weak-kneed fool in yielding to Jeff's guile.

"You're under arrest, Bill, and I'll have to take you out—"

Bliss was speaking, and at the words a wild, desperate light flared in Nelson's eyes. The policeman saw it, and came over to where he was standing.

"And don't get ugly," he cautioned, "or you'll go out in irons."

Suddenly something snapped in Nelson's brain, and in a mad moment he lashed out, quick as the dart of a snake.

"No irons for me!" he roared, and his fist crashed on Bliss' jaw.

From behind, Findlay let out a strangled yell. The policeman's head flew back, dropped forward again. With knees sagging, he crumpled to the snow.

"Billy!" again yelled Findlay. "Boy, you've done it now!"

Deaf to all in the mad panic that convulsed his brain, Nelson leaped for his sleigh. Frantically he stripped his load. He heaved it to one side and pitched on his blankets and grub box. But as he strung his dogs into line he saw a movement from the man in the snow.

"Diamond!" he screamed to his leader. *"Mar-r-che!"*

The dogs sprang to their collars and the sleigh started. Down the trail they swept and around the first bend. Then he heard the voice of Bliss.

"Stop, or I'll shoot!"

His answer was another yell at the dogs and they sped even faster for the spruce that would hide the camp from view. Two revolver shots crashed across the snow. The bullets thudded into the trees behind him.

FOR three days Nelson had fled, forsaking the hard-packed road, hitting cross-country for the trails and trapping paths of the Hatchet Lake Chipewyans. A dozen times he had cursed himself for that one mad blow. Impossible was it now to return. There was a jail sentence waiting for his whisky-running charge, and at least another six months for his unwarranted assault on Bliss.

The hours were sheer torture. Ahead of his dogs he ran on the narrow snowshoes which were intended only for trail use. At night he sat, desolate, before a

smoky fire with the ghostly trees latticed against the cold, white moon.

He was short of grub, short of fish for the dogs. He had no gun, for on his trips he had no use for one: moose and deer were too bulky to bother with, and wolves were an inconsequential factor. But now, unless he fell on meat of some kind, the future was discouraging, direful.

Ahead of the dogs he turned the matter over in his mind, doubtful of the ultimate issue of the struggle. Then, at the darkest hour, he blundered on a snowshoe track coming from the northeast.

"Thank the Lord!" he breathed, almost reverentially. He stood to one side to let his slow-moving dogs come into the hard-packed trail.

Nelson recognized by the webbing and the shape of the frames that the tracks had been made by a white man, probably a trapper. He pressed on eagerly, trusting that before long he would reach the camp of the unknown. For the camp would surely mean supplies both for himself and his dogs.

For an hour he traveled, the sun rapidly sinking in an amber sky. Then, suddenly, with a crashing re-echo, a rifle-shot rang across the wastes. It was followed in a moment by two more.

Nelson stopped his dogs abruptly, for the sound came from the direction of the trail he had broken, to the east. An explanation struck him.

"Bliss! Taking a crack at a deer!"

Dread seized him. He had misjudged the policeman, or rather Bliss' dogs; even allowing for the bend in the trail, his pursuer could not be more than ten miles' travel behind him.

On the point of starting again, he froze once more, for the single shots had developed into a regular cannonade of firing.

With sudden resolve he pulled his dogs into the shelter of a scraggly spruce. He tightened the thongs of his snowshoes and struck across in the direction of the firing.

For a half-mile he swung ahead, soundless save for the whoosh of the snow he kicked up before him, and the grunt of his webs. Then, just as he was wondering if his sense of direction were still true, he stopped short, for ahead across his path was another snowshoe track, wide and deep cut. He examined the sign. It was the unquestionable brand of a white man's racquet.

One glance showed him that it was not that of Bliss, for the policeman affected Indian-made snowshoes; nor was it of the same pattern as those he had been following with his dogs. He moved ahead with greater caution.

Before him was a slight elevation, a jack-pine ridge. He climbed to the top, but suddenly dodged back quickly, for beneath him figures were moving.

CAUTIOUSLY he raised his head. His first glance showed him Bliss' dogs, straining and growling in their harness, the sleigh rolled over on its side. And then he saw the rest.

There were four men: Bliss was one, recognizable by his parka and service cap, and three others, two in mackinaws and one in a blanket-coat. All save Bliss were armed.

There was considerable loud talk, but Nelson could catch only a few words. Then suddenly the man in the blanket-coat lashed out with his fist, and Bliss crumpled to the snow. For a moment he lay there and then sprang to his feet. He drove a hard right at his assailant. This was the signal for a general rush. Once again the policeman reeled backwards and fell. Two of the others went down with him.

Nelson decided to learn, if he could, what it was all about. While the attention of all four men was centered on the fight he began a swift descent of the hill. From spruce tree to ragged willow bluff he jumped, and at last was able to crouch down, shielded from view, a bare dozen paces from the others.

He heard grunts and livid imprecations. Then one man profanely yelled for a rope. Nelson took a chance and raised his head. He saw the policeman held down by two of the men; a third was making for Bliss' sleigh. There was another struggle, but it was cut short as the third man returned with the rope. In a moment the three stood up, leaving Bliss securely lashed.

In the interval Nelson took time to look the men over closely. All were bearded, all wolfish-looking. Two were thickset. The one in the blanket-coat was a blond giant. Bliss himself was wild-looking, for one eye was discolored and closing. Blood

was pouring from an ugly gash on his forehead. But he held his head up defiantly.

"Now what?" The blond one broke the silence.

"Bump him off," was the hasty answer. "And if y'ask me, I don't know what we bothered ropin' him fer. He's got dogs and he's got grub. We've got neither. Knock 'im on th' head, 'r slit his throat."

The blond man demurred, but the other two howled him down.

"What's one more, anyway? We might's well be hung fer sheep as goats." The speaker laughed evilly at his wit. "Anyhow, th' wolves 'll finish the job."

Nelson's breath came quickly at the monstrosity of the thing. The cold-blooded way they discussed Bliss' fate made his flesh creep. Bliss was nothing to him, in fact he was his enemy, but . . .

Suddenly a horrible temptation came to him: Why interfere? Bliss was indeed his enemy, and it was not up to him to interfere. Let Bliss be "bumped off" and let the road to freedom be opened for himself. All he had to do was to turn away while the three did their ghastly work. Then he could head for civilization and say that he had found the dead man beside the trail. The many tracks would testify for him.

At the thought he began to shiver. Was it worth it? On the one hand stood his liberty—and Peggy. On the other . . . What?

Before he could decide the tall man came forward with a suggestion.

"Tell ya what: One of us change duds with him! If we ever run into anybody, a cop takin' two men out 'll get us by. What' ja say?"

The idea seemed to catch the imagination of the listeners, for without waiting for more words they hauled Bliss to his feet, and unlashed the rope.

Bliss was not going to submit, however, without a struggle. He suddenly bent his head and rammed the leader in the pit of the stomach, sending him reeling backwards. The second man's fist flew out, and the third rushed in with his gun swung up as a club.

Nelson sucked a whistling breath. Gad! Three to one, and the one wounded! One unarmed wearer of the Red Coat against three devils. . . .

HE suddenly found himself crashing through the willows. And he was yelling like a madman.

"Hey, you damnable swine! Hey! Hang on, Bliss!"

He almost tripped over one man rising to his feet. In passing him Nelson shot out his moccasined foot viciously. The man fell back again, coughing up two of his teeth. A gun lay in his path; unthinking he heaved it into the bush. Then with his bare hands he tore into the two before Bliss.

His fingers caught one man by the throat; with a thud they went to the ground. Over they rolled; twice, and Nelson was on his feet. He saw Bliss running toward him, yelling encouragement. Then an arm was around his neck. He tore himself free, swung around and came face to face with the blond giant, to look down into the yawning mouth of a Service revolver. Instinctively Nelson ducked. There was a shattering roar, and a bullet tore the otter-skin cap from his head.

Nelson dropped to his knees, seized the man by the legs and threw him. Before the other could rise, Nelson had him, one arm locked around his neck, his right hand grasping the gun-hand of the other.

The man made a thrashing twist, and Nelson was beneath another lunge, and he was on top. In the snow, gasping and panting, the two struggled for possession of the revolver. There was no science; no attempt to hold the other still. All that mattered was to control that messenger of death. Another twist, and an animal-like snarl from the man he fought; another squirming heave from Nelson. . . . Then the gun roared again.

Suddenly, the world spinning, Nelson found himself free. He crawled to his knees, gasping. He looked on the twisted features of the man he had fought. In the agonized outlines he saw horrified surprise written deep, the surprise of one seized in the chill grip of death.

He gasped, and shut his eyes to close out the sight.

From behind came a sickening crunch . . . a grunt. Then came the coughing voice of Bliss.

"All over . . . they're done."

FIVE nights later, three men sat around the pot-bellied stove in the policeman's

log shack at Mile 341. There were Nelson, Bliss and old man Findlay.

"Here they are." Bliss drew an enclosure from an official envelope and pushed it across the table. "Once the photos didn't lie; it's them all right. Wanted for holding up the paymaster at the Lost Hope Mine. Never heard anything about it till I got back last night and found this waiting for me. Furthermore, I don't suppose I'd have ever got them if I hadn't run on them accidentally like I did."

"But the money?" put in Findlay.

"We found it on them, thirty-three thousand."

Nelson said nothing, in fact had scarcely spoken a word since the day of the fight. Bliss looked at him curiously.

"What's the matter, Bill? You're glum as a wet week."

Nelson sighed and looked up slowly.

"I can't get that bird's face out of my mind. He was the one who wanted to help you. . . . And I killed him."

Bliss nodded sympathetically. "I know, old man." He looked to the heavily barred door leading to the cells. "But he was the luckiest of the three; he got it swift and sudden."

Nelson rose to his feet.

"Guess I'll hit the hay."

He turned toward the door. Bliss drew a key from his pocket and snapped open the lock.

"Look, Billy," he said kindly. "I won't bother locking the cell you're—er—using, but I'll have to lock this main door. Matter of course, you know," he added awkwardly.

"I understand. Good night." And with the listless words Nelson stepped toward the cells.

Bliss came back and sat down. He was frowning as he filled his pipe.

"Billy takes it hard."

Findlay nodded, plucking at his goatlike beard.

"By the way," he asked in a lowered voice. "What happens to *him?*" and he jerked a thumb in the direction Nelson had gone.

"Billy? Oh, he'll get off; get off with a vote of thanks, I'd say," and Bliss grinned knowingly. Suddenly he got to his feet and crossed to his grub box in the corner. "Which reminds me; I'll have to take along those samples of Billy's particular brand." He drew out two bottles which had formed part of Nelson's load.

Findlay looked at him broodingly. "All ye got?"

"Sure, but it's enough. I wasn't going to haul the whole load back for evidence, so I saved these and destroyed the rest."

He set the bottles on the table and came back to his chair. Findlay looked at him for a moment and then spoke.

"I was thinkin', Corp: Is there any need for Billy to go out?"

"Why, sure," returned Bliss quickly. "I arrested him, or," grimly, "told him he was under arrest, so I'll have to go through with it. But pshaw! This other affair will wash his charge out. Don't you worry about that."

The old man nodded.

"Sure, I know. But th' very fact of having to stand his trial will queer him."

"Queer him? How?"

Findlay spat into the front of the stove.

"Don't ye know he figgers on gettin' married to Peggy O'Brien? Well, he does. And if Peggy knew he was a booze-runner she'd can him, and can him quick."

"But, good Lord! She knows he was convicted once!"

"Sure, sure. But that was long ago. Billy told th' gal he'd run straight, and if she found out diff'rent, well . . . " And the old man paused eloquently. "Then again," he went on, "he's got th' mail contract fer Sturgeon Portage, but if th' Gov'-ment found out about this, they'd cancel that deal, too."

Bliss groaned. "Don't, Pete. I've got a devil of a job, but there's no need to make it harder. It's duty, you know. I can't explain it, but if ever I went back on my job I'd be a traitor to myself as well as to the whole force. Heavens above, man!" he said almost fiercely. "If there was any loophole, don't you think I'd take it?"

For a long time silence reigned in the cabin, but at last old man Findlay, with a deep sigh, got to his feet.

"Well," he said slowly, "if that's th' way ye feel about it, I guess there's no sense tryin' to argue with ye."

Bliss also stood up.

"I've got to go up to the depot and send out a telegram, so I'll walk up the road with you a piece."

He put on his cap and coat. After testing the door to the cells he stepped outside with Findlay. He slammed the door of the main room shut behind him.

At the forks of the trail leading to Findlay's cabin they parted. And once the darkness had swallowed him up, the old man struck for the direction of his cabin, fifty yards away, with a speed surprising in one of his years.

PETE FINDLAY was deep in a profound sleep the next morning when his slumbers were shattered by a peremptory knocking on his door. The old man sat up, rubbed the sleep from his eyes, and jumped out of bed to admit his visitor.

The visitor was Bliss. He eyed the old man narrowly, and then stepped inside. Findlay seemed surprised.

"Well, well!" he crowed. "Look who's here! Bright and early, ain't ye, Corp?"

He turned away, and after pitching a couple of resinous logs on the still-warm heater, squatted on the bed and loaded his pipe.

"Well, what's new?"

Bliss eyed him grimly. "I've come to tell you something."

"Yeh?"

"Yes. A funny thing happened last night. When I got back from the depot, I found somebody had entered the barracks and had gone again. Not by the door. That was locked. By the window."

"Gosh!" The old man's eyes were wide with innocence.

"Another funny thing: Those two bottles had been tampered with, for one was uncorked."

"That so? Why d'ye say tampered with? Mebbe it blew off. Th' hooch inside was prob'ly pretty stout."

"Hardly." The policeman's next words were very slow. "For it wasn't whiskey in that bottle. It was cold tea!"

"Well, what d'ye know about that?" gasped Findlay.

"It looked to me," said Bliss, ignoring the question, "as though the man that had tampered with the bottles had been in a hurry. That, or he had left the cork off to draw my attention to it."

Findlay did not speak. His face was that of one overwhelmed with stunning news.

"D'you see where that leaves me?" asked Bliss.

"No. I dunno."

The policeman favored the ancient with a cynical look.

"No. You wouldn't. . . . It means that my case against Bill is knocked sky-high."

"Too bad," grunted Findlay. "But tain't no good belly-achin' about it, is it?"

"I know that," returned Bliss. "But what do I do now?"

Findlay considered. "Any tracks around th' place?"

"No."

"Any clues?"

"No."

"Well; ain't ye got no suspicions?"

"Suspicions!" Bliss repeated sourly. "You can't hang a man on suspicions!"

"Then," wisely chuckled the old man, "ye'd better forget it. A danged fool ye'd look climbin' up in th' witness-stand with a coupla crocks o' cold tea. Wouldn't ye, Corp?" He grinned widely. "But Bill? Goin' to let 'im go?"

"Go!" snorted Bliss. "I let him go two hours ago. Was there any sense holding him with my evidence gone?"

The old man was truly surprised now. "Gone," he muttered. "Wouldn't that hog-tie an' throw ye!"

He scratched his straggly beard and then began to smile. Without another word he turned to a cupboard. After much fumbling in its interior he came back with a square-faced bottle in his hand.

He poured out two cups, generously full.

"Corp," he said, wiping away bygones with a magnificent gesture, "all's well that ends well, as th' feller said. You're alive and kickin'; ye'll take these two cut-throats t' town, and prob'ly come back with three-up on yer arm. And ye know why, don't ye?" He looked at Bliss quizzically. "Because a certain party, who just now's high-tailin' fer town and Peggy as fast as his dogs can carry him, was too fine a lad t' see ye die. What more ye got t' worry about? Not a danged thing.

"Corp, I give ye a toast: to th' whitest, squarest-shootin' kid that ever drew breath —Billy Nelson."

And the two, the policeman in his trim uniform and old Pete Findlay in his baggy underwear, raised their cups, and drank.

# Hobnail Justice

## By CHARLES NELSON

**A leaping flame licks against the sky. Green-topped timber echoes its thunder—and a timber-topper gambles his life high up on a dizzy tower of death.**

RIPLEY VAUGHN, high-rigger of Camp Five, called "Rip" for short by the logging-crew, left the bunkhouse Sunday after dinner and made for the camp boss's house, dressed in his best. On the porch railing sat Peggy, Preston's pretty daughter, her slender body leaning against a post, slim arms poised, looking at the green, sun-drenched hills through a pair of field-glasses. Rip snatched off his hat and called:

"How's chances for a look?"

"Fine, come on up," invited Peggy. "The view is splendid from here. Looks as if somebody had piled the country on end to be photographed. I can see every donkey-engine and spar tree!"

Rip took a seat on the rail beside her, but forgot to use the glasses she handed him, being fascinated by the picture of Peggy herself. Her shining hair was lifted by the light breeze, her hazel eyes glinted in the sun. Rip wanted to say:

"Peggy, I've been crazy about you ever since we met. I can't live without you!"

Instead, he asked with a note of doubtful eagerness in his voice: "How about the dance Saturday night at Tarbridge. I've got a car and I'd certainly like to take you if you want to go."

She smiled apologetically. "I'm sorry, Mr. Vaughn. Honest, I'd like to, but I've promised Mr. Lorenz."

"Oh, I see," said Rip, politely, but looking as if he had accidentally bitten into a quinine capsule. "My luck!"

There was a moment or two of embarrassed silence while Rip recovered. "How do you like being back in camp again after Portland?" he asked finally. "You used to call yourself a timber beast like the rest of us." Then, a little anxiously, "You haven't gotten a longing to live in the city?"

"No, I'm glad to be back. I love the woods. But—Portland was lots of fun, in a way. The men are so nice, and take you everywhere. And they dress so well and—"

"Like Lorenz!" Rip broke in, and then could have bitten his tongue off.

Peggy colored. "Mr. Vaughn," she said soberly, "you know what the woods have done to me—killed my brothers and broke my mother's heart. Sometimes I think I hate them. In the city I can forget. But I got homesick and had to come back—to this—" Peggy made a graceful sweep with her hand toward the circle of hills. "And now I feel as if I must get away from it again, I don't know—"

Rip could not reply to this. He had been holding the glasses to his eyes while she spoke, to conceal the feeling they were sure to show. Now he handed them to her and abruptly changed the subject.

"See that big 200-foot tree over there to the right—just behind the cleared spot?" He guided her hands, his own a trifle unsteady. "Going to top 'er tomorrow, with powder for a charge. If you watch, maybe you can see it."

"Sure, that'll be great!"

"Well, so long! Got a date in town. See you later."

Although he would have been glad to linger, her ready "So long!" left him no excuse.

As Rip strode down the path he met Lorenz headed for the Prestons'. A nod and scowl were the only recognition he vouchsafed the timekeeper. Rip disliked him for a high-collar city dude. It was common rumor in camp that he was well-fixed and was trying to persuade Peggy to marry him and go to town to live. Rumor also had it that old man Preston wasn't unagreeable to the idea of being relieved of the care and responsibility of a motherless daughter.

Rip's thoughts were in a turmoil. How badly he wanted this girl nobody but himself knew. Still, mad as he was about her, he recognized that his feeling was purely selfish and looked the facts in the face. He wanted her to be happy above anything else. Evidently she liked the timekeeper; the fellow could give her more than he, Rip, would probably ever be able to; and how could he expect her to prefer camp life to the swell times to be had in town? Didn't he himself break away whenever he got stakey? Oh, h—ll, what was the use?

Rip jumped in his flivver, stepped on the starter and headed recklessly for Tarbridge, where he knew of a poker game that might help him forget for a while.

THE next day in the timber was a trying one for Rip. It was blustry—always unfavorable weather for high-climbing work. The spar-tree, or legging-mast, he was rigging up happened to be a monster gnarled fir more than eight feet through at the foot, thick-barked and the wood as hard as bone. Where he had to cut off its top, one hundred and fifty feet above the ground, the trunk was four feet through. Some of the limb-cutting had already been done, but Rip labored all day, standing in mid-air on his spurs, sweltering and sweating, axing off branch after branch, some of them as big around as his thigh. The edge of his wide, high-climber's belt chafed his waist, the spur-straps burned like hot bands, his legs ached, tired from strain. But he wanted to finish the job that day and kept at it doggedly.

At last he was cutting the ledge or shelf on which he was to lay the powder sticks. All around the tough trunk his sharp ax bit out the chips like a man notching a huge pencil to break it in two. The powder was hoisted up to him by the hand-line he had already rigged, and he laid it on the circular shelf several sticks deep, around the tree-trunk, ready for priming. As he took the coil of fuse in his hand he fumbled it and it fell. A gust of wind steered it into a small brush-filled gulch close by. He called down to his helpers and they went to look for it. The search took time and Rip lost patience,

came down himself and joined the hunt, with no success. There was no more fuse handy and he was stuck. As there was time to spare, however, he decided to go to camp for some.

When he reached the commissary and opened the door he got a shock. Peggy was there, standing in front of the counter with Lorenz. They were alone, her hand in his, her head bowed. She broke away when she saw Rip and hurried past him through the door without a word.

He closed it and followed her. "Peggy!" he called, "wait a minute, I want to tell you something!"

"Mr. Vaughn," she interrupted him hastily, "I've—" Her eyes met Rip's for an instant and she forgot what was on her tongue at the look she saw in them. Holding out her hand she said lightly, to hide her embarrassment: "Goodby! I'm off for town tomorrow."

"You mean for good?"

Peggy nodded and looked away uneasily.

Rip took her hand and gripped it till her fingers winced. "Good-by," he said huskily. And then, "Good luck!"

Peggy turned quickly toward her house.

RIP returned to the commissary in a desperate frame of mind. Preston heard his request for fuse and came out of the back room. Lorenz hunted through the shelves, then remembered having lent the last roll to Camp Four.

"Why the devil wasn't more ordered long ago!" commented Preston, testily. "I can't look after every little thing!"

"I'll hunt again," said the timekeeper. Preston joined in the search. Finally Lorenz dug out a short piece of fuse from a corner. "Is this long enough?" he asked innocently, holding it up.

"Hardly!" answered Preston. Then for the green timekeeper's benefit:

"It takes about eight or ten feet for a shot. You see it must be long enough to give the man who lights it a chance to get down the tree and make his getaway before the blast goes off."

"Oh, I see," said Lorenz.

Preston turned to Rip. "Did you look all over for the fuse you lost?"

Rip, in no pleasant humor himself, grasped at the implication in Preston's question and replied, "I sure did!" Then added: "Well, there's no fuse, so that settles it, I guess. May as well call it a day."

"Yes—unless you could whittle the dam' top off with your pocket-knife! You might try!"

Rip turned red. Without a word he took the foot-long fuse lying on the counter and went out.

Preston hastened after him and called good-naturedly: "Hey, Rip! Come back here, you young fool!"

But the high-climber was already on his speeder, going toward the woods. His back had the look of a blank wall. He flew rather than rode back to the timber. Arrived at the spar-tree he stood boiling with resentment while he capped the bit of fuse. He'd show them what a real timber-beast could do! He put on his climbing rigging in silence. His helpers spoke to him but he answered briefly and went up the trunk as swiftly as an ape in a palm-tree. At the powder-shelf he took the short piece of fuse from his pocket, leaned on his life-rope and jammed it viciously into a stick of dynamite, which he placed in the bunch around the tree. Then he glanced below.

*"T-i-m-b-e-r!"* he bellowed.

The men ran into the clear, looking aloft and wondering. Rip struck a match and the wind promptly blew it out. With a scowl he threw it away and struck another, which met the same fate. He grew vindictively calm. With deliberate slowness he fished a third match from his overalls, struck it and, shielding it with his cupped hands, lit the fuse. It hissed venomously, like a snake about to strike. Rip slacked and dropped the bight of his life-rope, jumped both his spurs out of the bark and let himself fall straight down the tree as far as his rope would permit. When his spurs hit the bark again he was many feet below the powder. He made another leap down. . . .

WITH a roar the explosion came. The force of the blast almost shook him from the tree. The trunk trembled as if a giant's fist had dealt it a savage blow. Leaning far back on his belt Rip looked above him. A circle of gray-black smoke had sprung out from the notch and spread on the wind. He had been able to get far

enough from the great blast to withstand the shock of it. But there was the huge, tottering top. To which side would it lean and fall? Would its massive limbs rake the trunk in descending and brush him from his footing? Would its butt strike him and knock him off? He was still a hundred and fifty feet from the ground.

Splinters, fir-needle and pieces of bark began to rain on his shoulders and upturned face. He dodged them as well as he could, never taking his eyes off the tons-heavy top. Nearly cut in two by the powder, it began to incline toward the earth. A piece of bark cut Rip's lip and blood spurted over his cheek. His hat was knocked off. A big sliver fell across his braced arm, numbing it.

But through it all his eyes remained riveted on the threatening mass of top and limbs over his head. Now it was nearly at a right angle. The whining swish of its fall sounded like a coming gale. It took off with a spiteful kick that sent the freed trunk tossing and reeling.

Rip circled on his spurs till he was opposite the hurtling top, his movements quick and sure as an acrobat's. As he made the half-circuit the logging-camp buildings flashed into view. Unconsciously his glance picked out the foreman's house. His thoughts raced to Peggy as he caught up the slack of his rope and flattened himself against the trunk. There was a sudden rush of wind, followed by a crash of branches as the top struck the ground. He was safe—and he had shown them! Blown the damn top off with a finger-length of fuse!

IN reckless downward leaps he reached the ground. His helpers stood gaping. Without word or sign he coiled his rope around his waist and made for the railroad track and the speeder, across the chaos of down timber. His eyes glowed, his head was in the air and his hair rumpled in the wind. His right arm hung stiff by his side, but with his left he wiped his mouth, leaving a bloody smear across his face. Belted and spurred, grim and grimy in his short black slicker, brown overalls and steel-caulked high-top shoes, he resembled a strangely accoutred warrior fresh from victory.

Jumping on the speeder he raced for camp. Midway he met the foreman coming toward him on a second speeder. Both slackened their pace and put on brakes, stopping within a few feet. Preston spoke first.

"I heard the shot. Did you find the fuse?" His voice was casual.

"No," answered Rip with suppressed scorn, "I whittled the damn top off with my pocket-knife!"

Foreman and high-climber measured each other. Again Preston spoke. "Get on my car and let me have yours. I want to go to the landing."

They changed cars without further remark and rode off in opposite directions, neither looking back.

When Rip was a short way from camp a woman came running toward him. As he came close he recognized Peggy. He slammed on the brake and stared. Her hair was blowing in the wind, her face was flushed and she was out of breath. She gazed at him as if she were seeing a ghost. Rip noticed half-dried tears on her cheeks. With a leap he was on the ground.

Peggy flung herself headlong into his arms, panting: "Rip, Rip, I thought you were killed!"

Rip kissed her hard, heedless of his cut lip. Peggy got out her handkerchief and wiped his face tenderly. Reckless of his hurt arm Rip snatched the tiny square from her hand and drew her to him. His belt and rope made a rough embrace, but she didn't seem to mind.

She lay in his arm, repeating: "Oh, Rip, I thought you were killed! I was watching through the glasses. You didn't make the ground and when the top fell and I couldn't see you I ran to the commissary. Dad had left and so I ran. . . . Oh, Rip!"

"Well, I'm certainly alive," Rip reassured her. Then frowning: "But Lorenz—aren't you going to marry Lorenz?"

"Why, no!" answered Peggy, emphatically. "I turned him down. I was saying good-by when you came into the commissary."

"But what about going back to town?"

"Sh-h! I'm a logger's woman! I didn't know till I thought I had lost you. I belong in the timber—with you, Rip. I'm a timber beast, too!"

*A Novelet of the Snow Country*

# Buccaneer of the Barrens

By SEWELL PEASLEE WRIGHT

**Eau Blanc was forbidden territory, a Barrenland fur-pirate's gua.ded wilderness. But the grinning young trapper raised his war-flag there, daring Desjoie's Cree killers to come and blast him out.**

IT was hard going, even with the current in their favor, for the two big freighters were loaded until they had but three or four inches free-board amidships. There were three dogs in each canoe, lying asleep up near the bow, and under and behind them were packs of food, cooking utensils, a roll of roofing paper, several axes, a rifle apiece, a tangle of rusted steel traps of various sizes—all the paraphernalia of a trapper going into the bush for the winter.

The man in the stern of the foremost canoe was Barry West; a tall, rangy chap

with wiry muscles that didn't show but that proved their presence by the powerful, tireless thrust of the paddle Barry wielded. His face was weatherbeaten, but still young, and his gray eyes seemed constantly to twinkle as though at some inward, amusing thought.

Shorty Miller, in the second canoe, was in some ways the antithesis of Barry. Shorty was stocky, almost plump, but like Barry he had the muscles of a deer; flat, powerful, untiring. His round, chubby face was forever dismal, however, and his blue eyes fostered an undying sadness.

The two canoes swung around a sharp turn in the river, and Barry turned his head and pointed with a flashing paddle to a figure on the far bank.

"By the looks, somebody's cooking dinner over there. What do you say we go over and chin awhile? Maybe he can give us a line on this Eau Blanc country. And besides," he added ingenuously, "I'm hungry!"

"It might be a good idea," agreed Shorty, and accordingly the two canoes headed for the distant cooking fire.

The man squatting beside the fire hailed them cheerily as they neared the shore, and in a few minutes the partners had their own meal spattering on the fire, and were chatting with the stranger.

"You guys goin' up around Eau Blanc post?" he exclaimed. "Well, all I got to say is you've tackled a mansized job."

"Why?" asked Barry surprised. "We heard they were bringing some mighty fine fur out of the country up around there, and that there was plenty of room. What's the matter with it?"

"I don't know, rightly. I've only been working through here the last two years, and I haven't got the straight of it. But as I get it, this Sadi Desjoie, who runs the post there—damn free-trader, you know—wants to keep the country straight Indian. Bunch of Crees up there, and if my info is right he sells them bootleg booze and cheats them right and left. That's why he doesn't want any whites cluttering up the scenery."

"But why don't the authorities do something about it? They're pretty hard on anybody selling booze to the Indians."

"The Indians are all in with him. Nobody has been able to get the goods on him. Same way with the white men he runs out of the country. None of them ever got anything on Sadi himself, although they had a hell of a flock of suspicions.

"The country's big, and there's lot of room, so most everybody just stays away rather than run into trouble. Sadi's the cock of the roost, I guess. Looks like you two are askin' for trouble, breezin' in there!"

"Trouble follows me like my shadow," sighed Shorty. "I might a' known there was a catch in it somewhere."

They chatted for half an hour, stretched their legs with a little walk along the shore, and then resumed their journey, their late companion wishing them a somewhat pessimistic farewell.

IT was in this fashion that Shorty and Barry received their first intimation of what lay before them. Three days later they arrived at their destination.

It was pretty country, low and rolling for the most part, with now and then a high ridge, or a stretch of muskeg or tamarack swamp. They passed Eau Blanc post, but did not go near. It was on the distant shore of a large lake, unnamed on the map they had, and they had resolved that they would neither trouble the factor of the post, nor brook trouble from him. All they asked was to be let strictly alone.

A few days' cruising located some likely looking territory, and they set to work at once. There was wood to be cut, a headquarters camp to be built, some lay-over camps to be put up if possible in the limited time available, some trails to be blazed, toboggans and sledges to be built—starting a trap line in new territory is by no means an overnight job. The flurries of snow that filled the air every few days kept spurring them on, for they realized that in a week or so snow would fall that would not leave the ground until late in the spring, and then their activities would be much hampered.

At last the main camp was completed. Barry stood back and surveyed the squat, sturdy log building with approving eyes.

"Well," said Barry, seating himself on a convenient stump, "there we are."

"Yes. But how long'll we be there? That's the question." Shorty was not inclined to optimism.

"Until we get damn' good and ready to leave!" Barry's answer was vigorous and uncompromising.

"You know what they told us about this Sadi what's-his-name fellow," said Shorty, shaking his head. "A bad egg from the word go, with no use for white men. He's made other fellows so sick of the country they've been glad to pull out right in the middle of the season."

"Old down-in-the-mouth!" chuckled Barry. "We've been here—how long is it now? Two-three weeks, anyway, and we haven't been bothered. Got our trap lines all located, headquarters camp already built, and nothing done so far to drive us out. Looks to me—"

"Looks to me like you spoke a mite too soon," interrupted Shorty. "We got company, and by his looks he's bearin' us no key to the city, or anything."

He nodded toward the lake in gloomy triumph. Barry turned leisurely to survey their visitor. He was a full-blooded Cree, Barry guessed; unusually tall for an Indian, and with keen, dark eyes that held no friendly gleam.

SILENTLY the two partners awaited their visitor's approach. Barry filled his pipe with casual ease, lit it carefully, and ground the match under foot. The Indian paused in front of the two men, staring down at them with contemplative eyes.

"*'Jou'!*" said Barry pleasantly.

"*'Jou'!*" replied the stranger shortly. The very fact that he did not reply with the usual cheery "'Jou'!" of the friendly Indian was significant.

Shorty and Barry waited patiently; Shorty dolefully, and Barry with smiling contentment.

"You think trapum here?" asked the Indian at length.

Barry shook his head, and sent a blue cloud of smoke rolling out into the frosty air.

"We don't think a thing about it," he replied in Cree. "We're *going* to trap here, my friend."

"You speak my language? Good! But do not call me a friend. Little John is no friend of yours. I come to tell you you must go."

"Why? Nobody's trapping over this territory, and this is a free country, is it not? Then why shouldn't we trap here?"

"Not for white trappers. You are not wanted here. You go back to some other country. You will save yourself much trouble. That is my word to you."

"Listen." Barry rose to his full height of a shade over six feet. There was no smile on his face now, and his gray eyes were as chilly as the leaden clouds overhead. "I don't know who you are and why you're here, and I don't care. But there's one thing sure, and that is we're going to stay here until we get plenty ready to go, and that won't be any time this winter. I take it that Desjoie sent you here; I understand he thinks himself bad medicine and the big boss in these parts. Well, you tell him for us that we're sticking around—permanently, if we like the place. Now run along and report."

The Indian shrugged his shoulders indifferently. "I tell you like a friend—it be much better for you to go. Very much better. But—I will tell Sadi what you say."

He turned on his heel and strode rapidly down the trail toward the lake. Shorty watched the retreating figure with brooding eyes.

"You see? Trouble right off the bang! This is a hell of a life, if you ask me."

"Well, I don't know but what you're right," said Barry, grinning to himself. "It might be a good idea to haul out while the goin's good. He looked as though he meant business."

Shortly glanced suspiciously at his partned. "You mean that?"

"I'll go if you will."

Shorty sighed dismally and shook his head.

"You know damn well I wouldn't back down!" he said dolefully. "We got chips in the game now—" he jerked his head toward the camp—"and we'll have to call his bluff."

"I'm not so sure," said Barry thoughtfully, "that it's a bluff we're calling. But we'll stick, just the same, eh?"

"We'll stick," nodded Shorty.

## II

THEY had finished their work none too soon, for the next morning it was snowing. The small, compact flakes drove downward with that intense, merciless in-

sistence that is typical of a big snow in the Northland.

"Well, she's here," said Barry after a brief inspection of the sky and the thermometer nailed to the outside of the cabin. "This is winter, my son!"

"Yes. And as soon as it stops snowing, the thing for us to do is to give the new toboggan a tryout, and take a run down to the H. B. post for some more grub. Save making a trip later, when we'll be busy—unless you want to patronize this Sadi what's-his-name, and run the chance of being poisoned."

"Toss you for the job," offered Barry, spinning a coin in the air suggestively.

"Tails!"

Barry flipped the coin, and it fell ringing on the table.

"Heads!" he declared, chuckling. "It's your job, Shorty."

"I knew it!" said Shorty, sighing. "I never won a toss in my life. Never expect to."

Barry chuckled again, and the two busied themselves checking up their stores, and making out a list of what they would need to last them through the winter.

The snow continued to fall steadily and without intermission until the morning of the third day. Then it came off cold and clear, and the wintry sun shone down on a white and silent world of mighty beauty. The man who can gaze upon the virgin forests of the far north when the first big snow is upon them, and remain unmoved, is a man without a soul.

The fourth day the snow had packed a bit, and Shorty started, taking all six dogs, for he would have a heavy load coming back. He knelt at the rear of the toboggan and cracked his long whip close to the ear of the lead dog.

"Let's go!" he shouted. "Mush, you mangy brutes!"

The splendid, tawny bodies plunged forward, the seemingly tangled harness drew taut. With a rush they started over the firm crust, yapping joyously.

"Looks like a Derby team!" called Barry. "See you some more, Shorty!"

"About a week! So long!" The dogs swung upon the lake and disappeared.

Barry turned back into the cabin, a little sorry that he was not in Shorty's place. The dogs were fresh, and while not yet hardened would make easy work of the light toboggan. Coming back it would not be so easy; perhaps there would be more snow, and a trail to break, but Barry was a true bushman, and loved the country and the life of those who wring their living from it. He pulled his light, small trail shoes from the pole rafters of the camp, and put in new lashings. Barry used the quick and simple "squaw hitch," so this was not a difficult matter, and in a few minutes he was outside, rifle in hand, gazing around with meditative eyes.

"I'll make a few sets now, just to keep busy," he mused. "Might pick up an odd fur or two, and anyway I need the exercise."

In his pack he had all that was necessary; a coil of brass snare wire, a big chunk of frozen meat, and a tightly corked, squat bottle containing a white powder like flour —strychnine. Contrary to the usual idea the trapper of the far north uses steel traps but seldom, and then largely in the spring, when ratting. The dead-fall, the snare with an unfailing balance pole to draw the noose tight, and the quick-acting poison—these are the things upon which the bushman depends.

The webs felt clumsy and awkward for the first mile or so, but it was not long before Barry found his snow legs, and was swinging along in the easy, bent-kneed stride of the man who walks nearly half his life on the indispensable webs of the snow country.

BARRY was making a marten set near the top of a ridge when he was startled by a high-pitched cry of fear, that cut suddenly through the hovering white silence.

A woman had uttered that appealing cry. Instantly Barry was on his feet and running in the direction from which the cry had come, calling out as he ran. But he received no answer; after that one brief scream of terror, all was silence. The white, huge silence of the Northland.

It took Barry but a moment, however, to locate the girl who had cried out. He saw her snowshoe tracks, saw where she had clambered to the top of a drift, only to have the treacherous snow slide with her, plunging her down the side of the ridge,

so steep at this point to be almost precipitous. Tangled in her webs, she had half-rolled, half stumbled down the step decline, to bring up at the bottom against a huge, jagged boulder with a force that had evidently knocked consciousness, if not life itself, from her slight body. She lay, a pathetic little huddle, motionless and silent, crumpled against the rock.

Barry jerked out of his webs with two quick motions, and ploughed through the snow to the girl. A rapid examination proved she was still alive. Although her white and scarlet toque was stained a darker red in one place near the back of her head, Barry decided that the wound was merely superficial. It would be but a matter of minutes before the girl regained consciousness.

Quickly he removed her snowshoes, and carried her upon the flat top of the boulder. She was dressed as a man of the north country would be dressed: heavy belted mackinaw, and mackinaw pants, stagged off at the bottom and tucked into heavy white woolen socks. Light, soft moccasins, coming just above the ankle, completed the ensemble. It is a convenient and becoming costume.

She was not beautiful, not even pretty, but there was an elfin attractiveness to her features that was oddly appealing. Her brows were level, and her nose short, straight, and well modeled. Her mouth was full, but not too full, and quirked upward at the corners, even now. A tiny, rebellious wisp of raven black hair had stolen out from under her toque, and her skin was smooth and creamy; the complexion that most properly goes with black hair and dark brown eyes.

All these things Barry noticed as he worked. It took him but a minute to get a fire blazing on the rock, and a minute or two more to gather a sizable fuel supply. From his pack he took the little tin pail he used for "b'iling the kettle," and filled it with clean snow.

While the snow was melting, he carefully removed the toque, and examined the wound. As he had thought, it was but a little scalp wound, now well clotted. He decided it would be best not to meddle with it. As he was replacing the toque, the girl groaned a little, and rolled her head from side to side impatiently.

"All right, miss," said Barry cheerfully. "Everything's fine, and I'll have a cup of tea ready for you in a moment—"

THE girl looked up at him, her calm, level gaze studying him as though he were some strange insect. Again Barry felt her antagonism, and a strange coldness grew around his heart.

"I thank you for what you have done," she said, slowly, her gaze now fixed on the distant landscape, "but—I would prefer not to be further indebted to you."

"You—you won't drink the tea I have made for you?" asked Barry incredulously, as the full meaning of the girl's remarks at last sank home.

"I—I would prefer—to be under no further obligation to you," repeated the girl very softly.

"But why?" cried Barry.

"Because," said the girl, and for the moment angry, contemptuous fire flashed in her eyes, "I know you—know what you are."

"I don't understand," replied Barry wretchedly. "But certainly I shall not force my simple hospitality upon you." He picked up the pail and threw the steaming contents out onto the snow.

"Perhaps you will understand when I tell you I am the daughter of Sadi Desjoie," said the girl, rising to her feet.

*"What?"* The word burst from him explosively. This splendid creature the daughter of Sadi Desjoie?

"I thought that would explain things to you!" said the girl coolly, and with a little nod of dismissal she jumped down the rock and started putting on her webs.

For a moment Barry hesitated. He was about to insist upon a further explanation of her attitude, but his stubborn pride came to the rescue. With a shrug, he too leaped from the rock, and started ploughing through the snow to the top of the ridge, where he had left his own racquets when he went to her rescue.

There was a frown on his face, and a dull ache in his heart, but he did not turn to look back. If the girl felt that way about it, that was her business.

He had no means of knowing that the girl's soft and wondering gaze followed him until he disappeared from sight, and that there was an ache around her heart too.

## III

IN a desultory, half-hearted way, Barry worked at his little trap line until Shorty returned. Always, it seemed, the girl's elfin features came before him when his mind wandered from his task, and his brain was a whirligig of questions he asked himself but could not answer.

How did it happen that a man like Sadi Desjoie had a daughter like that? Why had she refused his hospitality even to the extent of a cup of tea? Why had she looked at him with that flash of contempt in her eyes? What had Sadi told her about him? What—

He would break off his useless cogitations with an angry shrug, but always the flood of questions poured back upon him. Barry was glad when Shorty returned, so that he could have someone to talk to.

Shorty's trip had been uneventful. There had been good going all the way, and the dogs had behaved beautifully.

"Anything happen around here while I was away?" asked Shorty when he had finished his brief account of the trip.

"Why—nothing much," said Barry hastily, and changed the subject.

The next day they started putting out their lines, each taking a team of three dogs. For several days they went peacefully about their work, and had just about decided that Sadi's warning, as conveyed to them by the Indian, Little John, was an empty threat. And then the first blow fell. Barry came one evening to the lay-over camp, to find it a mere black rectangle of charred timbers.

It could not possibly have been set from Barry's own fire, for it had been four days since he had been there, and the ashes were still warm. There was only one conclusion possible, and that was the little camp had been deliberately fired, and that meant Sadi had at last declared war.

Barry went back into the bush and made camp. There were ugly lines around his mouth, and a light in his gray eyes few men had ever seen there, and always to their regret. Like many habitually genial souls, Barry, when aroused, was as savage and unforgiving as an otter.

On his way back to the main camp, Barry found further evidences of Sadi's activities. Every trap had been either sprung or robbed of its catch. The lines about Barry's mouth grew grimmer and grimmer.

As he approached the clearing in which the main camp was located, he saw a strange team of five dogs standing in the trail that led to the lake. His own dogs noticed the stranger at the same moment, and sent up a yapping challenge. Barry silenced them with an angry word, but it was too late.

The door of the camp flew open and a man dashed out, running for the waiting dog team.

"Halt!" shouted Barry, jerking his gun from under the lashing ropes.

The man paid no heed, except to run faster.

Barry got his gun clear just as the man sprang onto the empty toboggan, and the dogs leaped forward.

With an oath Barry brought his rifle to position and fired. As he did so, one side of the fugitive's toboggan hit the shoulder of a snow-hidden rock, and swerved sharply to one side. That was all that saved him.

The bullet hit the rock and went whining shrilly off into space. Before Barry, quick as he was, could work the belt of his rifle and fire again, the stranger was out of sight.

Barry cursed silently and hurried up to the camp.

As he opened the door, a cloud of smoke puffed in his face, and in the far corner of the cabin, where the bunks were located, he saw a little flicker of yellow light through the gray smoke that filled the room.

Leaving the door swinging wide, Barry ran forward. The fire had been started on one of the bunks, and the dry spruce bows that served as spring and mattress were flaming fiercely. In a minute more log walls would have caught, and then it would have been an almost impossible task to save the camp.

With a blanket from the other bunk, Barry beat out the flames, although his brows and lashes singed, and his hands and arms burned in a dozen places. At last, sure that the fire was safely out, he sought the open air, coughing and strangling with the smoke he had been breathing.

"What the devil—" Shorty had just arrived, and the smoke still issuing from the

door of the cabin had caused him to hurry up just as Barry emerged from the door. "Trying to burn down the place or something?"

"Not me!" gasped Barry. "This is friend Sadi's work. Imagine, Shorty! The thermometer twenty odd below, and practically all our provisions in the camp there—and that dirty half-breed trying to burn it down!

"And that isn't all. The layover camp down on Jackfish is burned down, and every trap on the back route has either been sprung or robbed. And we thought he was bluffing!" he ended bitterly.

"And *that* isn't all!" put in Shorty grimly. "Half of my line was wrecked just like yours, and a cache of furs I picked up going down there was stolen when I came back."

Barry nodded.

"I didn't think I'd be alone in my troubles. He evidently is going to stop at nothing—but if he's looking for trouble, he's sure to come to the right place to find it.

"We'll tie the dogs close to the camp, and keep watch tonight. He might try to shoot or poison the dogs, or even set fire to the camp. And in the meantime—you'll need a new bottom in your bunk, Shorty. I'll go cut some boughs,"

"It would have to be my bunk, of course," grumbled Shorty.

## IV

"IT'S easy enough to say we'll fight back, but how?" asked Shorty as they were eating breakfast the next morning.

"My plan is to do just what Sadi did," explained Barry. "He warned us, and then started. We'll warn him that we mean business too, and then we'll strike back, and strike hard if he doesn't see fit to declare the war off."

"You going up there to the post and put yourself right in his hands?" asked Shorty incredulously.

"Sure!" laughed Barry. "He wouldn't dare to do anything with you here, knowing where I was. This Sadi is a wise chap; he doesn't appear in these things personally, at all. He knows enough to have a healthy fear of the law. Now, if he gets me, it won't be in any direct fashion like that. I'm going to the post and warn him to call off his men, and if he doesn't—well, warfare is a game best played by two, eh?"

As soon as the dishes were put away, Barry harnessed the dogs and started for the free-trader's post of Sadi Desjoie.

As he approached the post, he was rather surprised at the ground it covered. There was the big store, a house nearly as large, and a group of four or five small camps, about the size of his own lay-over camps, ranged around the clearing. Rather impudently, under the circumstances, the scarlet flag of England whipped from a tall pole near the shore.

Barry stopped his team in front of the store, and looked around. The clearing seemed deserted, but there was smoke coming from the chimneys in every one of the buildings, and Barry was sure he saw faces peering out at him from several of the small square windows. He strode on into the store.

It was the usual trading store: a big, bare room, with a huge stove in the middle, a long counter across the back, and behind that, shelves of nondescript merchandise.

There were two people in the room; the girl, who was sitting beside the stove, and a small, weasel-faced French-Indian leaning casually across the battered counter.

"'Jou'!" nodded the half breed with a sly smile.

"Good morning," said Barry shortly. "I am looking for one Sadi Desjoie."

"I am Sadi Desjoie," said the weasel-faced man, smiling again. "Ees eet some-t'ing I can do for M'sieu?"

"Yes. Tell your men to stay away from our territory. They have burned one of our lay-over camps, tried to burn the main camp, with all our provisions, and have robbed our traps. If they try just one thing more—there'll be trouble. Bloody trouble, Desjoie!"

"Sacre bleu!" Sadi's face was a mask of injured, hurt innocence. "You say deese t'ings to Sadi Desjoie? For why, M'sieur? For why should Sadi, the trader, do theese t'ings to you?"

"You know very well why," snapped Barry. "You sent Little John to warn us before you started trouble. I've come here to give you like warning. The next time

one of your men starts something on our territory, we'll shoot, and shoot to kill. Self-preservation is the first law of this country, Desjoie!"

"You unspeakable brute!"

Startled, Barry turned to face the girl. She had risen to her feet and stood with her flashing eyes fixed on Barry. "How dare you come here and talk to my father like that? How dare you? Have you no sense of decency whatever? Oh—"

She broke off with a shrug of impotent rage, and turned her back on the speechless Barry.

"You see, M'sieur," said Sadi with his ever-ready, ingratiating smile. "Jaquelin, my daughter, she cannot understand why M'sieur talk so to her father. Eet ees—eet mus' be, M'sieur, that you misunderstand. Eef you have trouble, Sadi ees not responsible. Sadi your good friend; friend to all the trappers, and why not? Eet ees from the trapper that Sadi make his living, *hein?*"

"And the best living from the *Indian* trappers!" remarked Barry significantly. "I am not going to argue with you, Desjoie. You can do as you please. I have given you warning as you gave us warning. If you want trouble, you know where to come to get it!"

Barry snapped out the last words with the crackling, ugly emphasis of a lashing dog-whip and turned to leave.

Just as he reached the door the girl looked up and for a moment met his gaze. Then without a word, she resumed her study of the landscape through the window.

Barry's teeth came together until little knots of muscle writhed along his jaw, but he gave no other sign to show how deeply her scornful glance had wounded him.

He knelt on the back of the toboggan and shouted at the dogs, and as they romped out onto the clear blue of the lake, Barry looked up at the sky.

It was gray, leaden, desolate, cold. He pulled his *koulatang* tighter around his face, and shouted to the dogs, but there was no life in his voice.

## V

FOR several days following the delivery of the partners' ultimatum, there was peace. They did not dare to leave their supplies in the headquarters camp unguarded, so they ran the lines alternately, while one stayed at the main camp to guard it and its precious contents.

It was, however, the breathless lull that precedes the sudden northern storm.

Barry ran into it first.

Around noon, just as he bent over to lift a mink from a steel trap, a rifle barked again from the bush, and Barry's hands were stricken with a sudden numbness. The bullet had struck the steel trap, dashing it from his hands, and numbing them with the shock.

On the instant, Barry put the bole of a tree between himself and the shooter, judging the latter's position by the sound of the rifle. He waited for a moment, but there was no sound.

Quietly he crept from the shelter of the tree, and cautiously made his way toward the spot where the shooter was, or had been.

Barry's fighting blood was thoroughly aroused, and he was determined to have it out with this skulker who fired from ambush. One of them would be dead before Barry left the trail—and the skulker had all the advantage.

With dogged courage Barry proceeded. Every moment he expected to hear the spiteful crack of a high-powered rifle, and the burning agony of the bullet in his vitals, but he kept on.

A hundred, perhaps a hundred and fifty yards away, he came to the spot where the man had stood, behind a clump of small tamaracks. There was the empty shell on the snow, and the snow shoe tracks leading up to the spot—and away from it. But the man was not there.

Barry picked up the shell. It was a .303; powerful enough to down a moose at five hundred yards. He pocketed the shell with a grim smile, and started out on the trail that led away from the clump of tamaracks.

The man was making good time, Barry could tell that from the long strides he was taking. Also, it was an Indian he was following, as he had suspected, for the toes of the webs turned sharply inward. The pigeon-toed tendency of the Indian is greatly exaggerated in his snowshoe stride.

Doggedly Barry followed the trail. He knew that it was very likely the Indian doubled back on his tracks, and was

waiting for Barry to pass close by. He kept a sharp lookout, but never did he discover any suspicious coloring or movement in the bush, and he kept on, using the peculiar dog-trot that eats up so many snowy miles.

The man had followed the top of a long ridge that dropped, at its end into a lake. As Barry came out in view of the lake, the skulker's rifle roared again, and Barry heard the crack of the bullet as it passed close to his head.

On the instant, Barry dropped to a crouching position on the snow, his rifle at his shoulder, and his gray eyes, like a hawk's, searching the bush ahead.

It took him but a split second to find what he was looking for: the faint haze of powder smoke from the Indian's rifle. It came from a little clump of tag-alders along the shore, and even as he looked, Barry detected a slight movement in the alder branches, and caught the flash of sunlight on the blued steel.

Barry's rifle roared. Like a flash the bolt flew back, the shell went flying, and the rifle spoke again.

There was a sudden commotion in the tag-alders, and then from them, out onto the lake, there staggered a man. Three steps on the ice and he crumpled up, his rifle sliding from him on the smooth surface. Even from where he stood, Barry could see a black stain spreading on the ice, from under the motionless body.

Barry reloaded his rifle, his face gray and strained.

"First blood for us," he muttered as he turned back on his trail. "I hate it, but it had to be. He asked for it."

Shorty, when he heard of the two attempts on Barry's life, and the shooting of the Indian, shook his head.

"Now we *are* in for it," he said dolefully.

"Not any more than we were. They tried twice to pot me from ambush. What more can they do than that—except perhaps get one of us the next time? We warned them, and they replied with bullets. I saw them, and went them one better, that's all."

They kept watch that night, but nothing happened until just as the two were washing up for breakfast.

Something struck the door with a sharp thud, as though a rock had been thrown against it. There was no other movement or sound.

Barry opened the door cautiously, and gave a little exclamation of surprise. Sticking in the door was an arrow, and in the cleft end was a note scribbled on birch bark.

Forgetting caution in his amazement, Barry stood in the open doorway and drew forth the note, while Shorty looked over his shoulder.

*"Blood is on your hands,"* read Barry, *"Still we will let you go in peace, if you will. But if you do not go, we shall wipe you out at once—and we shall not miss. If you will go, hold up your hands above your head, in token. We shall be watching. If you do not—"*

The threat was left unfinished, and the note was unsigned.

"What shall we do, Shorty?" asked Barry quietly.

"Give me that note," said Shorty dolefully. From his pocket he drew a match, and with a swift motion he struck the match and applied it to the bark. The note burst into a flare of smoky flame, and Shorty tossed it contemptuously toward the bush, where lay the invisible watcher. "That's the only answer I can think of," said Shorty.

As he spoke a rifle cracked from near the edge of the clearing, and both Shorty and Barry leaped inside the cabin. As they slammed the heavy door shut, the invisible rifle spoke again, and a bullet crashed through the heavy door sending slivers flying through the room.

"Nice, pleasant people," said Shorty. "Look!" He lifted his left arm. There was blood streaming from it, and from his left side.

"My God! They got you!" exclaimed Barry. "I—"

"Got nothing!" disclaimed Shorty. "Bullet went right plumb between my arm and my side, barely nicking me. They did miss again, no matter what the letter said!"

Shorty's diagnosis proved correct. The bullet had made a big bruise on both the inside of his arm and the side of his chest, but the skin was barely broken.

"There's one thing that puzzles me," murmured Barry half to himself, as he swabbed the two wounds with iodine.

"What's that?"

"There is only one person at Eau Blanc

post who could have written that note," said Barry slowly, "and that is—"

"Who?" asked Shorty, a sudden light of understanding shining in his eyes.

*"Sadi's daughter, Jacquelin!"*

## VI

THEY were prisoners; as much prisoners as though they had been behind prison bars. Only they were confined by hot lead instead of cold steel.

Once Shorty walked too close to one of the windows, and a bullet blew one of the small panes to bits, missing its mark by a scant inch and burying itself in the opposite log wall. Every now and again a bullet crashed through the door with a flash of flying slivers, as if to let them know that to venture forth would mean death.

They tried, of course, to locate the hidden marksmen, but without any luck.

"I'm going wide-open crazy, if this keeps up!" declared Shorty late in the afternoon, the direct reason for the remark being another bullet through the already riddled door. "This is gettin' on my nerves, and I don't mind sayin' so!"

Barry was laying in his bunk, pulling meditatively on his pipe.

"I don't blame you, Shorty. Two sided shooting is a great game, but being potted like rats in a trap is no sport for the rats—meaning us. It's up to us to do something."

"Such as what?"

"Well, we can't fight them back from here, that's sure. The only thing to do is to take the war to them."

"How,"

"I've just been thinking that over. Say I slip out of here tonight—it's cloudy, and will be dark—and go over to the post. Maybe I could do enough damage there to make them feel like quitting over here. Eh?"

"You'd probably get killed."

"If we stay here and do nothing, the chances are we'll both get killed," replied Barry rather grimly. "You stay here and guard the outfit, and I'll take the chance."

"Why not let me go?" asked Shorty aggrievedly. "I'd like doggone well to take a pot shot at some of those babies."

"You've got a blighty," chuckled Barry, brightening up as the prospect for action took more definite form in his mind. "Besides, this is my idea. I want to stretch my legs a little!"

Shorty grumbled about the arrangements, just as he would have grumbled if he had been elected to go. That was his nature. But when at last it was the time elected for Barry's departure, Shorty wrung his partner's hand, and bade him good luck in a voice that shook a little.

"So long, Shorty," replied Barry in a whisper. "I'll be back before daylight. Hold the fort!" And with an answering grip of the hand, Barry softly opened the door and disappeared into the night.

Shorty stood close to the door listening, his face tense and white, for he knew that it was a desperate chance Barry was taking. The night was pitchy dark, but with snow on the ground, any moving body is likely to be visible at close range. If the silent watchers had crept up close under cover of darkness, Barry's doom was almost surely sealed. If they had remained at a distance, he had a fair chance of getting away.

A minute throbbed by—two minutes, and still there was not a sound from outside. Three minutes—four. Shorty drew a long, quivering sigh of relief. With any luck at all, Barry was out of the danger zone by now.

BARRY himself was buoyed up by the excitement of the thing. He closed the door behind him as silently as a shadow, and stood crouched against the cabin, motionless, for a long minute, listening and peering into the surrounding darkness.

The snow at his feet was a dusky, wavering gray in the utter darkness, and the edge of the bush a formless shadow, surprisingly close.

Slowly he pulled his webs from the snow and slung them across his back. Still there was no sound, no movement in the bush.

Cautiously Barry moved away from the camp.

There was a well-packed trail down to the lake. Stooping low so as to make himself as inconspicuous as possible, Barry crept quickly and silently toward the lake.

Once a twig cracked sharply in the bush not ten feet away, and Barry paused for perhaps two minutes without moving a muscle, rifle ready and his eyes striving to pierce the gloom. There was no further

sound, so Barry decided it was only a frost-brittle branch cracking under its load of snow, and he moved silently on.

Once at the edge of the lake, he drew a soft sigh of relief, and slipped into his webs. Then, carrying his rifle easily in one hand, he set out in the direction of the post.

He had only his sense of direction to guide him, and it took him over two hours to make the trip, but at last he saw a fraint yellow square of light ahead of him, and he knew he was near his objective.

Cautiously he drew near.

The light, he found, emanated from the store. All the other buildings in the clearing were dark and silent.

This was not quite what Barry had expected, but it fitted in with his plans beautifully. Barry had not explained fully to Shorty, knowing his partner would object to the risks entailed, but Barry had conceived the idea of making Sadi a hostage; the price of his liberty being the permanent ending of hostilities.

"Now if that's only Sadi in the store, I'm in luck right," mused Barry as he crept silently up the trail leading to the store. "I'll have him hiking back to the camp with me in about two shakes of the proverbial lamb's tail!"

Barry peered in at the lighted window, trusting to luck that he would not be observed, and chuckled silently as he saw that the lone occupant of the big room was Sadi himself, seated dejectedly in front of the stove, his head nodding on his chest.

"You've got the surprise of your life coming, old timer!" thought Barry, moving silently around to the door. "Here goes!"

Quickly he flung open the door and swung it shut behind him.

Sadi started from his chair, his hand reaching for the heavy .45 he wore from a sagging holster, but Barry stopped him with a significant jerk of his rifle.

"Don't!" he advised softly. "I'd shoot you as quick as I'd shoot a wolf, Desjoie." And in Barry's eyes, and in his voice, Sadi read the truth of the remark. Barry was playing for high stakes: his partner's life and his own. It was not the time or place for soft sentiment.

"But, M'sieur—" began Sadi excitedly.

"Quiet!" commanded Barry. He whipped his handkerchief from his pocket, and securely gagged the half breed. Sadi's gun he appropriated for his own use. A heavy mackinaw hung from the wall, he tossed to his prisoner with a brief command.

"Get into that, my friend, and we'll go," said Barry. "I see a pair of webs sticking in the snow outside the door; they'll do for you nicely. Hustle, now; some of your friends may be dropping in!"

Sadi made strange guttural, gagging sounds in his throat and his black eyes rolled in their sockets as he tried to speak, but Barry herded him out of the door with a good-natured chuckle.

"Yes, I know all about it, old timer," he said. "You don't understand why I should be so high-handed, and this is an outrage, and you're as innocent as an unborn babe, and all that sort of thing. You can tell me all about it over to our camp. But just now, you get into those webs and *mush!*"

Mutely protesting, but obeying the jabbing muzzle of the gun, Sadi obeyed. A less discerning man than Sadi Desjoie would have known that Barry meant business that night.

THE trip back across the lake was without incident, except that Sadi would not make as good time as Barry thought he should, and constant prodding was necessary to make the older man keep up the stiff pace Barry set.

It took some time for Barry to locate the trail that led up to his camp, but after scouting around for half an hour or so, he located it, with a little sigh of relief. It would not be long before the rising sun would make his position decidedly precarious.

"Listen," he whispered intensely to his prisoner. "We're going back into camp. Your men will shoot if they hear or see a thing. And if I can manage it, they'll have to shoot through *you* to get *me*. So watch your step, old timer!"

Barry made Sadi lead the way, guiding him with a soft pressure on his shoulder. The half breed slipped along as quietly as a snowflake falls, and in three or four minutes, they stood crouched in front of the cabin door, safe.

Three soft taps on the door, and a fourth after a moment's pause, the signal they had agreed upon, and the door clicked open,

Barry shoved his prisoner inside, and shut the door with a triumphant bang.

"I got him, Shorty!" he whispered delightedly. "I got him!"

"Got who—what?" asked Shorty in amazement at seeing two shadowy figures instead of the one he had been watching for.

"Sadi! The king-pin of the works. Now he'll call off the animals or we'll talk turkey to him. Some idea, what?"

"Well I'll be damned!" said Shorty admiringly, lighting a couple of candles.

Barry removed the gag from Sadi's mouth, chuckling.

"Talk all you want to now, old timer," he invited. "The sooner you let your friends outside know you're here, the sooner we'll all be happy!"

Sadi working his aching jaw speechlessly for a moment, his eyes flashing.

"You fool!" he managed to ejaculate at last. "You beeg fool you! Leetle John, he go against me. He say he run you out himself, he and his men get all your furs and supply. And besides, Leetle John, he a fool; he try make love to my Jacquelin —that real reason we fight.

"You t'ink you do beeg theeng, you capture Sadi; all you do is get one more mouth to feed, and leave Jacquelin alone for Leetle John! *Sacre nom du nom,* M'sieu, you one beeg fool, you!"

"I knew there'd be a catch in it somewhere," groaned Shorty.

Barry was silent. He was thinking of a girl with lustrous dark eyes and an elfin face, alone, at the mercy of Little John and his men.

## VII

SADI'S revelations changed everything. Instead of holding the big trump card they had figured Sadi would be, the partners had merely picked up a worthless discard. And they had left a young girl at the mercy of a band of men who, as they well knew, would stop at nothing under the heavens.

From Sadi they learned that Little John himself, with two of his men, was personally directing the siege of the cabin, and Barry chuckled delightedly as he thought how angry the Indian would be to learn of Barry's trip to the post, and his return with the prisoner, right under three pairs of watching eyes.

"I guess they took it more or less for granted that we had gone to bed when the lights went out, and went to sleep on the job," he remarked to Shorty. "Otherwise they would have plugged me sure. Indians can see in the dark like cats!"

"All that risk for nothing!" replied Shorty. "What are we going to do now?"

"There's only one thing to do, and that is, to go back again tonight and get the girl. With her father there, she would have been safe, I imagine. I'm going back to the Post again tonight, and bring the girl back with me!"

"M'sieur," said Sadi gravely, "you are a fool—but a so brave fool. I t'ink I like you better as a friend than as an enemy, *oui!*"

"M'sieur," said Barry as gravely, "you found that out too late. You're the cause of all this trouble, and—I'm rather careful about my friends!" Sadi smiled greasily, and lapsed into silence.

Shorty, of course, strenuously objected to Barry's plan, but as usual, Barry had his way.

"They don't know yet that I was away last night," he urged. "Sadi disappeared; that's all they'll know. You can't track on packed trails or glare ice. And—well, we're white men, aren't we?"

The exit was accomplished exactly as it had been the night before, and in many ways, with less danger, for there was a stiff, noisy wind blowing that would hide any slight sound Barry might make.

The wind was against him going, but he reflected optimistically that it would be behind him on the way back, and in that way even things up. He remembered, however, the slight margin of time he had had the night before, and he hurried as best he could, bucking the stinging, arctic wind with bowed head, and thanking his lucky stars for the snug, wind-proof *koulatang* he wore. A thirty or forty-mile wind on an open lake, with the thermometer hovering between twenty and thirty below, is a wind that chills to the bone if one is not adequately protected.

THE post presented a very different sight, tonight, for every camp in the clearing was lit up, the store was ablaze

with lights, and even from a distance Barry could hear the excited shouting and the weird, maudlin singing of drunken Indians.

"They've located Sadi's booze cache," thought Barry grimly.

"With them drunk, my job will be easier in some ways, and harder in others. But the girl's in greater danger, certainly. Sober, I doubt if Little John or any of his crew could touch a girl with as much white blood in her veins as Jacquelin—no matter if her father is Sadi Desjoie! But drunk, an Indian will do anything." Barry pressed on faster than ever.

For a minute or two Barry crouched in the bush at the edge of the clearing, getting his bearings. All the noise seemed to be coming from the store, and Barry decided it was likely the larger part of the Indians were in the big room of the store holding a drunken pow-wow. Perhaps, he thought with a sudden flare of anger, the girl was there too!

The thought stung him to action, and quietly he stole up to the end of the store, staying away from the windows and the door, for he would almost surely be observed if he looked in a window, and the door might fly open any time.

He could hear very well from his position, crouched against the lee side of the cabin, for the men inside were shouting with drunken abandon. Two or three men were trying to sing a French voyageur's song, and were having very good success. One young buck with a voice decidedly uncertain, was relating an endless tale of his prowess as a trapper. Close to the wall two drunken Indians were conversing solemnly in Cree, discussing the most absurd topics with drunken gravity.

At last, from the hodge-podge of sound, Barry weeded out the voice of Little John.

He was speaking in Cree, telling what a very brave man he was, to go against Sadi. He enlarged at length upon Sadi's fear of him, and hinted that he held a club over Sadi's head. He cursed Sadi as a coward because he had run away the night before. He praised Sadi's good liquor, and called it by its Cree name which may be freely translated as "Water-of-joyous-burning."

"And now," he ended triumphantly, "Little John will take the girl Jacquelin. She will be his squaw. She is beautiful, she is strong, she is a good worker! Lucky is Little John, to have such a squaw as Jacquelin!"

He continued, Indian fashion, with a long list of the girl's charms, and her desirable qualities as a squaw, but Barry waited no longer. He knew from the way the Indian talked, that she was not in the store. Undoubtedly, then, she was at Sadi's house, and to the house Barry made his way.

Barry knew, of course, that the girl would be guarded, and he took no chances. Carefully he crept up to the house, and peered in at the corner of one of the lighted windows. He was looking into the kitchen, and there was no one in sight. He moved along the wall, and again peered in. This time he had better luck; the girl was sitting, bound to her chair, in the center of the room, and in the doorway between that room and the kitchen sat a big buck Indian, leering at the girl, and just as Barry peered in, draining the last drink from a quart bottle.

Carefully Barry looked around, but he could see no further guards. Undoubtedly, with the girl tied, and with no thought of an attempt at rescue, Little John deemed one guard plenty.

Barry crept around the house to the rear door. He knew he had no chance to sneak up behind the Indian guard, for the instant he opened the door, the icy draft from outside would warn even the drunken guard that danger threatened.

There was no time to lose. At any moment the drunken Little John might come staggering out of the store to claim his squaw.

His gun ready, Barry flung open the door, and closed it instantly behind him. The guard turned and leaped to his feet, but before he could even touch his weapon, Barry had him covered.

"A move or a sound and you're through!" he said quietly. "Back up to the wall there, and keep your hands high. There!"

Silently the Indian obeyed, his eyes popping from his head and his jaw sagging in alcoholic bewilderment.

Keeping the Indian covered, Barry cut the girl's bonds.

"Hurry! We're liable to be discovered any moment. Get into something warm and do it quick!"

The girl glanced at him coldly, without a word, but did as he ordered.

"Now keep him covered a moment," he said to the girl, "and I'll fix him so he won't give the alarm."

Hastily he bound and gagged the Indian, and laid him on the floor.

A moment later they hurried out into the night, across a dark part of the clearing, into the bush, around to the shore, and out onto the lake.

Not a word did they speak; it was no time for conversation.

Barry had picked up the girl's webs as they passed out of the house, but the ice was blown smooth over the larger part of the lake, and it would be some time before they would need the racquets. Hastily they struck out across the smooth ice, the wind directly behind them; the post, with its bright lights and its sounds of revelry at their backs.

Perhaps three minutes after the two set forth, there was a sudden commotion behind them, and they knew the girl's flight had been discovered. They could hear excited voices calling drunkenly, the wind bringing the words to them loudly, but strangely distorted. Figures dashed back and forth across lighted windows, and doors opened and shut; a yellow rectangle one moment that disappeared the next with miraculous suddenness.

"Thank God they're drunk!" muttered Barry to himself. "Their muddled heads will never put two and two together. They'll think it was Sadi that freed her, if they think at all. That guard was too drunk to be able to tell them anything." The girl said nothing, but hurried on beside her rescuer in silence.

Without much difficulty this time, Barry found the trail that led up to the camp, and he whispered a brief warning to the girl, enjoining silence as the price of their lives. She nodded silently, and Barry, crouching low, led the way up the trail.

THEY were just about to leave the trail and enter the clearing when Barry, with that odd sense that bushmen often develop, felt a presence near him. He reached back and gripped the girl's arm suddenly. As he did so, a rifle roared deafeningly only a few yards away, and Barry heard the action click as the empty cartridge was thrown out and a new one fed into the chamber.

Barry turned like a flash and picked up the girl in his arms.

"Shorty!" he shouted as he ran toward the camp with his burden. "Open up! Hurry!"

There was a great crashing in the bush behind him, and the rifle roared again, scoring a clean miss in the darkness.

He saw the door of the camp swing open, and he half plunged, half stumbled through it to the warmth and safety of the camp. A third bullet thudded into the wall of the camp just as Shorty slammed the door shut.

"Never touched us!" exulted Barry. "We fooled them again!"

Amidst a rapid fire of congratulations and questions, Barry lighted some candles and declared himself ready for a hot cup of coffee.

The girl and Sadi sat apart, close together, conversing rapidly in French.

"Have some coffee, miss?" asked Barry when the steaming refreshment was ready, and holding out a tin cup invitingly.

The girl glanced up at him coldly.

"Thank you, no," she said icily. "As your prisoner, I would prefer to accept no favors at your hands."

Barry, remembering that once before she had refused his proffered hospitality, flushed and turned away without a word.

"What's the matter with you?" asked Shorty, addressing the girl in amazement, and with his usual bluntness. "Here Barry risks his life to save you from Little John, and you talk—"

"I beg your pardon," interrupted the girl frigidly. "My father has told me the whole story."

Shorty turned to Barry, and shrugged his shoulders. He said something under his breath that sounded suspiciously like "Oh, hell!"

Barry drank his coffee in silence.

## VIII

TWO weary days dragged by in the camp. Jacquelin and Sadi talked in low voices in their own corner of the room, and aside from an occasional brief answer to a direct remark, held no communication with the partners.

Shorty, as was his nature, grouched

glumly, proposing at intervals to go out and lick the whole crew single handed, one at a time or all at once. Every time the watchers of the cabin sent a bullet plunking into the walls, or splintering through the door Shorty swore under his breath and looked longingly at his rifle.

Pacing restlessly up and down the cabin, Barry turned the situation over and over in his mind. To stay in the cabin, with four mouths to feed, and without fresh meat to eke out the rations, would mean starvation before many weeks—and besides, with Sadi and the girl acting as they were, the situation was intolerable.

What, then, could be done? That was the question Barry asked himself, and pondered until his head fairly ached. It was late in the afternoon of the second day before the solution came to him.

That night Barry ate a hearty meal, and stuffed the pockets of his parka with bannock sandwiches. Sadi and the girl looked on curiously, but asked no questions. Carefully Barry cleaned and oiled his rifle, and adjusted the micrometer sight to his satisfaction. From his bag of personal odds and ends he drew out a soft, heavy, leather sling, and threaded it through the swivels of the rifle. Then he stood the gun in the corner near the door, lit his pipe, and smoked calmly and patiently until after midnight.

Up until the last moment Shorty tried to persuade Barry from attempting to carry out his plan.

"They'll bump you off sure!" he protested. "They saw you comin' in the other night, and they'll be watchin' for just some such move. There's no sense in committin' suicide, just to be doing something."

"The suicide business is going to be on the other side, Shorty," said Barry grimly. "It's darker than a pocket outside, and even if they do take a pot shot at me, they won't be able to hit anything in the dark. If the worse comes to the worst, I can always dash back to the camp.

"Shucks! If you want to be worrying about anybody—worry about them!"

Barry slipped into the warmest garments he had, with his heavy fur *koulatang* over all. On his hands he had two pairs of mittens; one of fine wool, with the forefinger free, and the outer pair of muskrat, fur side out, and lined with heavy wool. He slung his rifle over his shoulder, felt his pockets to make sure that the several extra clips of cartridges were safely stowed away, and then, with a cheery, whispered word to Shorty, he softly opened the door and disappeared into the darkness.

Once outside he wasted no time in making his way out of the clearing and seeking the shelter of the bush.

IT was hair-raising work, for every moment he knew the icy stillness of the night might be shattered by a rifle report, he would be hunted down like a marauding wolf. At any moment he might run almost into the arms of a waiting, silent watcher, to be shot without warning, without a chance, or else made a miserable prisoner.

The seconds dragged into minutes, and Barry continued his silent, shadow-like progress without any alarm being raised. He swung through the bush in a great circle, away from the lake, toward the steep ridge that ran back of the camp, overlooking the clearing and the lake.

The crust was firm, and even without his webs, was sufficient to support his weight, but he had to move with the utmost caution to avoid snapping a twig, breaking through a soft spot in the crust, or otherwise betraying his presence. It was slow, exhausting work, for every nerve was tense, every muscle taut, but at last, after perhaps two hours' maneuvering, he reached his objective: a great hemlock that towered somewhat above its fellows at the very top of the ridge almost directly back of the camp.

For perhaps ten minutes Barry relaxed at the foot of the tree, resting. Above, the branches screeched and crackled now and then, in frozen agony, and the gentle breeze that was springing up sighed remotely in the needles far overhead.

At last Barry straightened up, adjusted his rifle on his back, and started climbing the tree. He could not prevent the rasping sound of his clothing rubbing against the rough bark, as he gripped the rugged bole with legs and arms, and he had visions of being potted by some alarmed watcher, as a squirrel is knocked from the trunk of an oak tree, but he kept doggedly on.

He reached the first of the great outspreading branches, and being careful not to dislodge its accumulated snow, rested

for a space. The climb had been a long one, and hampered with his heavy clothing and the weight of his gun and ammunition, it had been a hard one as well.

He resumed the climb in a few minutes, however, carefully working around the trunk from one great out-thrusting branch to another, until at last he was close to the top, and could see the dense blue-black sky overhead, but little lighter than the utter, icy darkness that surrounded him.

At the point Barry selected, two large branches emerged from the trunk side by side, and within a few inches of each other, forming a sort of precarious platform. And upon this insecure perch, close to the trunk of the tree, Barry seated himself, huddled over the rifle across his knees, and waited for the coming of the dawn.

It was bitterly cold, and the breeze made it worse. The tree swayed surprisingly, and its branches groaned and crackled in protest. The minutes dragged by in a weary procession. From time to time Barry shifted his position a bit, to give his cramped muscles a rest, but in the main he was motionless, silent, watchful, waiting as relentlessly as fate itself for the coming of the light.

AT last the dawn broke; gray and cold and clear. The darkness dissolved slowly. Gradually Barry could make out the line of the horizon, the concealing branches of the tree in which he was perched, the sheen of the lake, the camp itself, and suddenly it was light.

Cautiously Barry moved a little, to a position from which he commanded a wide sweep of country to the west of the clearing. For a moment his cold gray eyes searched the bush, and then they lit up with a cold fire.

He crouched against the trunk of the tree alertly. His eyes did not leave a small red speck that was moving in the bush as he mechanically adjusted the sling, twisted it around his arm in the old familiar position, and brought the comb of the rifle to his cheek.

For a moment he peered through the tiny aperture of the peep sight, the little spot of red just barely visible over the gold bead of the front sight. Then slowly, steadily, he pressed the trigger.

The rifle roared like a crack of doom. The red spot jerked suddenly, moved for a moment, and then sank motionless in the snow.

Barry drew back the bolt of his rifle slowly, and caught the empty shell as the ejector tipped it upward.

"A red mackinaw is a bad thing to wear in your business, my friend," he muttered as he pocketed the empty shell and closed the bolt on a new one.

Barely had he turned down the bolt when the figure of another man appeared, running excitedly, not a hundred yards from the dead man sprawled in the snow.

It was a more difficult shot, but Barry had had much practice and with the crack of his rifle its second victim for the day staggered, ran haltingly a few steps, and then fell straight forward into the snow.

"Devilish business," muttered Barry, "but—it's your lives or ours, and I prefer that it be yours!" He moved around to the other side of the tree, making sure he was sheltered always by the concealing boughs of the tree. From his new location he could command a view to the north and east, and once more he saw a figure moving in the bush.

Barry's rifle roared for the third time, and again a moving figure sank motionless in the snow. And then for a long time, Barry saw no living thing in the bush.

FOR several hours he scanned the bush without avail. He drew his frozen sandwiches from his pocket and munched them slowly as he watched, wishing the while for a steaming cup of coffee.

Around three or four in the afternoon, Barry caught sight of a cautious figure skirting the shore of the lake, preparatory to starting toward the post. It was four hundred, perhaps five hundred yards away, and Barry elevated his rear sight carefully. To miss now would spoil his plans utterly, by alarming the rest of Little John's crew too soon.

Carefully Barry lined up the sights on the slinking, cautious figure. He pressed the trigger and the gun roared through the stillness, but instead of stopping the distant Indian, the bullet sent up a glistening shower of ice at his feet, and he started out on a desperate run.

With a muttered oath Barry snapped the bolt back and closed it with what seemed

to be one continuous blur of movement.

The man was further away now, and running like a deer, but he was in plain view, and outlined sharply against the ice.

As Barry's rifle spoke again, the man stumbled, slid for a moment on the ice, half scrambled to his feet, and then collapsed in a little motionless heap.

"I don't think they'll stir again until after dark," muttered Barry, and he proved to be a good guesser. Although he watched vigilantly all the rest of the afternoon, until it grew so dark he could not see a hundred feet away, nothing moved in the bush, or out across the lake.

Barry felt reasonably certain that there were several watchers left, and that as soon as night fell, they would rush to Little John and his companions with the story of the disaster that had overtaken them.

"By dawn every man jack of them will be back here, with blood in his eyes," mused Barry. The thought somehow, seemed to please him.

Shortly after dark he slid down from the tree and boldly made his way directly to the cabin. He had an idea there would be no watchers on the job.

He was right.

## IX

BETWEEN gulps of hot coffee Barry answered the questions Shorty fired at him, receiving Shorty's admiring comments with a little shake of his head.

"It was sickening work," he said shortly.

"No more sickening than being shot at and finally starved to death!" said Shorty. "It was either them or us and—"

"I know. Up here each man has to protect his own skin. But it was sickening work, just the same. And now how about you—all packed?"

Shorty indicated the bundles piled up in the center of the floor.

"Ready when you are: been working at it all afternoon. Blankets, grub, all the furs. What's left in the cabin won't be much of a loss."

Barry set his cup down and put on his parka again.

"Let's go!"

Sadi and Jacquelin watched them inquiringly, but, neither asked any questions. There was a troubled look in the girl's eyes, as if she did not know just what to believe as she glanced from Barry to Sadi and back again.

Together the partners slipped out into the night. There was an odd chance that they might be watched, and potted, but their situation was still desperate, and they took the chance. The dogs had not been shot by the skulking Indians, probably because dogs are at a premium in the north country and the Indians figured the dogs worth more alive than dead.

Quickly the partners harnessed all the dogs to the larger of the two tobaggans, dreading every moment to hear the crack of a rifle, or some indication that they were still watched. They finished the job without being molested, however, and returned to the cabin.

"You two get dressed for what may be a long trip," said Barry shortly, nodding toward Sadi and the girl.

"We go away from here?" asked Sadi eagerly.

"We do—right away!"

While Sadi and the girl were putting on their things, Barry and Shorty loaded the toboggan, made the load fast with the lashing rope and gave a last look around the cabin.

"Where we go, M'sieur?" asked Sadi with his ingratiating smile.

"I don't know yet," said Barry. "The young lady can ride, the rest of us will mush along behind. Leave the candles burning—those two in the holders—so they'll think we're still here when they come back." He closed the door carefully behind him, and Barry motioned toward the toboggan.

"Will you ride, miss?"

"Thank you, no," said the girl. "I have tried to make it clear before that I did not care to accept any favors at your hands!"

Barry shrugged and turned away. Shorty spoke in a low tone to the dogs, and they almost jerked him off his feet as they tightened the tail-rope. Jacquelin and Sadi followed Shorty in single file, and Barry, his rifle ready, brought up the rear to guard against an attack.

BARRY'S plan, in brief, was to take possession of the post, and thus cut off the enemy from their source of supply.

The little party did not head directly for the post, however, for they wanted to give Little John and his men plenty of time to get away. They bore toward a point perhaps a mile above the post, and waited on the far shore of the lake for perhaps two hours before venturing cautiously down the shore toward the post.

As Barry had expected, the place was dark, and since it was not yet midnight, that could only mean that the post was deserted.

Barry left the party some distance away and made a brief survey, just to be sure they were not walking into a trap, but found every evidence of a hasty and complete exodus.

He called to Shorty, and five minutes later they were all four in the big room of the store, the stove roaring jovially, the kerosene lights blazing, and the doors barred.

"You and your daughter might just as well get a little sleep," suggested Barry to Sadi. "Shorty and I are going to watch for the return of our little friends, so they don't try any tricks on us, but there's no reason you shouldn't sleep. Here are plenty of blankets, and back in the store room everything will be quiet."

"Eet ees mighty good of you, M'sieur," nodded Sadi gratefully, with his smirking, unpleasant smile. "We leave our saftee in your so brave hands!" And bowing to each of the partners in turn, he left the room. The girl, after a moment's hesitation, followed him.

THE long silent hours dragged by at last, and in the south and east the darkness thinned to gray. Shorty, leaving Barry to watch, put on the coffee pot, and began rustling breakfast. The aroma of the coffee and bacon, and the sounds of Shorty's busy clattering evidently awoke Sadi and the girl, for they appeared a few minutes later, and with a brief word or two the girl took charge of the culinary matters and left Shorty free to watch for Little John's return.

As she busied herself with the work, Jacquelin watched the two partners carefully, and more especially Barry. His profile was toward her, and she studied the clean-cut lines, a little frown puckering her brows. Now and again, when Barry glanced her way, she lowered her eyes quickly, and ignored him utterly.

"Breakfast is ready," she announced at last.

The hungry men needed no second invitation, and the meal was quickly disposed of.

They had just finished eating when Shorty, who had maintained a post of vantage near a window called out grimly.

"Here they come!" he said. "Better get your rifles ready, you and Sadi; they may try something!"

"I do not theenk so," grinned Sadi, his eyes evil. "Theese place ees strong. See the heavy wooden shutters at the windows, and the strong bar across the door! Theese men know; I theenk they weel want peace, M'sieur!"

It soon became evident that Sadi was right. The band of men gathered in a cluster at the edge of the shore, arguing excitedly. The smoke pouring from the chimney was proof that the post was tenanted, and it was not difficult for them to figure out who the tenants were.

At last one man detached himself from the group and slowly approached the store. His hands, empty, were held above his head, palms forward—the sign of peace the world over.

Barry met the Indian at the door, and waited for him to speak first.

"You catchum post, all food, every-t'ing," said the Indian haltingly. "We sorree we no friends with you. We—"

"You're rather late with your regrets," cut in Barry coldly. "You go back and tell Little John that if he has anything to say, to come and say it himself. Understand?"

The Indian nodded and retraced his steps.

## X

LITTLE JOHN smiled a thin-lipped smile as he looked around the store. His eyes rested longest on Sadi, who seemed to shrink beneath the Indian's level gaze. But when he spoke, he addressed himself to Barry.

"We are the losers," he said shortly in Cree. "It is much different from what I told you. We must have food; we must be friends."

"We didn't ask for this trouble, Little John," said Barry curtly. "All we asked

was that you leave us alone. Instead of that, you destroyed our sets, burned our camps, stole our furs, shot at us from ambush, made prisoners of us in our camp. And now you say you would be friends with us!"

A sudden light flared in the Indian's dark eyes.

"Yes we do these things!" he snarled. "That is right. But why?" He paused dramatically, his beady eyes roaming from one tense face to the other. "Why? I will tell you why! Because we were lead by a man with an evil mind; a man to whom wealth is a god; a man who sell bad liquor to us, and as its price, make us do as he say. We do these things because—" and he turned and pointed a lean and quivering finger at Sadi—"because that man make us!"

Sadi's dark face flamed a sullen red, and an evil flame flickered in his eyes.

"You lie!" he said hoarsely.

"I do not lie! You do these things. And more than this! My father told me—"

BEFORE the Indian could complete the sentence Sadi snatched up Barry's rifle, his eyes gleaming with insane fire.

Shorty and Barry leaped forward to snatch the weapon from the half-breed's hands, but before they could reach him, Sadi fired.

Little John leaped sideways just as the gun roared, and the flame from the muzzle seared his cheek, the bullet thudding harmlessly into the wall behind him.

The Indian cried out gutturally and sprang forward. Sadi swung his gun wildly, but, it landed glancingly on the Indian's shoulder just as Little John's long right arm shot out and his bony fist crashed against the stubby point of Sadi's jaw.

Sadi grunted sharply and staggered backward. As he did so, his foot tripped over a large piece of stove wood on the floor and he lost his balance.

With a cry like the squeak of an angry rat he fell. The back of his head struck the sharp corner of the stove with a sickening crunch and he fell limply to the floor, his jaw sagging open. There was a momentary odor of scorched flesh and hair in the room.

For a moment there was utter silence, and then the girl sank to the floor beside Sadi with a little horrified, sobbing cry.

She lifted the dangling head, and her hands came forth red and sticky. Barry glanced at Shorty and shook his head slowly.

"He's dead," he said softly. "It is unfortunate—but I do not blame you, Little John. You were here under what amounted to a flag of truce. He—well, let us say nothing more about it."

The girl had been listening, her eyes wide with sorrow, her lashes wet with tears.

"But—" she said painfully, "he—he was my father! And he's dead!" The tears came in a rush now, and she bent over the still figure, sobbing.

"He is dead, yes," said Little John slowly. "But—*he was not your father!*"

*"What?"* Three voices cried out the word in tones of startled amazement.

"He was not your father," repeated the Indian calmly. "He knew I knew that; that one reason why he shoot at me."

Slowly the girl arose to her feet, her eyes fixed on the Indian's impassive face.

"Not my father?" she repeated dully. "Then—"

"It is not a short story," began Little John. "Many years ago, when my father, he is my age, this Sadi come up here. A white man—from the States, I think, and his French wife, they build this post here. Sadi come here. He want to make love to the woman. She hate, fear, Sadi, and tell her husband. The husband, he tell Sadi to go away, never come back, or he will shoot. Sadi, very angry, shoot this white man from the bush one day. Hide his body at bottom of lake. Go back to post, take the woman. Two, three weeks, later, she kill herself.

"There is a little baby, a girl. Sadi, nobody knows why, kept the little girl. Maybe, he think be good to the girl, the ghosts of her mother and father will not come back to haunt him. I do not know.

"He is a very bad man, Sadi. He sell liquor to the Indians. He threaten them. They are ignorant; they think Sadi their friend. Sadi tell the police the white man sell him the post; the Indians, they say so too, and the police believe. The little girl, he hide.

"When the Great Father make the law so that there is no whiskey to be sold Indians, Sadi, make it himself, and sell it—"

*"No!"* interrupted the girl in an agonized whisper. "The white men—like these—they sell the whiskey. That is why—"

Little John shook his head.

"I tell the truth," he said. Sadi make the liquor. He tell you the white men that come in do it, to explain why he fight these white men. We fight for him, because we like the whiskey Sadi make. We know that if he goes, we can get no more whiskey.

"This time, Sadi go too far; give us too much to drink. We think he will be the boss. We turn against Sadi. I—"

"Little John," he said solemnly, "has been a fool. He has been a very bad man. But—" and he flung his head up proudly, "Little John is not a liar. I know these men out there. I speak for them and for myself. I say, if you will forget we, too, will forget—and we are those who lose. Five of our brothers are stiff and dead on our toboggans even now. We were fools; we have paid the price. Now we would be friends."

Barry consulted his partner and the girl with a glance. What he read in their eyes evidently satisfied him, for he turned to the Indian with a smile, and extended his hand.

"We will be friends," he said slowly. "We trust the word of Little John."

Little John nodded gravely, and in turn shook the hands of all three.

## XI

IN the big room of the store, the three of them sat around the stove silent. Much had been cleared up in the last two days, but still there was an awkward stiuation confronting them.

Jacquelin had found Little John's story hard to believe at first, but the Indian had supplied details and names that could be verified. It was a shock to her, of course, to learn that the man she had loved as her father was the murderer of her natural parents, and that the two partners Sadi had represented to her as whiskey runners who would debauch the Indians, were in reality decent, honorable and eminently likable men. She had written the birch bark note at Sadi's suggestion, in the hope that the warning would scare the two partners away without bloodshed. And now—

Bravely, but with tears not far behind her dark eyes, she had apologized to Barry for all she had done, but Barry had only taken both her hands in his, and made her eyes meet his own.

"Do you think," he had said softly, "that I mind that—*now?*"

Jacquelin was disturbed, thrilled, and a little afraid of what she read in Barry's eyes, and she had changed the subject abruptly.

And now the girl was left with only the two partners to look after her. It was a situation that had to be met, but none of the trio was anxious to broach the subject. It was Barry who at last broke the uncomfortable silence.

"It strikes me, Shorty," he remarked with studied carelessness, "that you and I are in a way responsible for things being as they are here. It's up to us to see the thing through."

"Absolutely," nodded Shorty, with less glumness than usual.

"My idea would be to work our trap line from here," proposed Barry. "A few changes, and that could be worked out, I'm pretty sure. Jacquelin could have the house, and you and I could make our headquarters back in the store room."

"It is mighty kind of you," said Jacquelin in a soft voice, "to put yourself out in this way for me."

"It is nothing," protested Barry.

"Absolutely," nodded Shorty again.

"Well, then let us consider that settled," continued Barry. "We'll make our headquarters here, where we can keep an eye on things for you, Jacquelin, and then—in the spring—"

"And then—in the spring," mocked Shorty with a broadening smile, "I'll be losing my partner!"

Both Barry and Jacquelin flushed at the accusation, and glanced rather sheepishly at each other.

"How about it, Jacquelin?" asked Barry softly, after a momentary pause.

The girl's cheeks were burning, but she met Barry's inquiring glance bravely.

"Wouldn't it be nicer, Shorty," she said with a smile, "to say you *would gain* a partner in the spring?"

# Flaming River

## By EDWIN M. SAMPSON

**To save a wild-eyed, frenzied woodsman, Sgt. Manning ran the gauntlet of flaming Yellow River death. Yet neither blood-debt nor trail comradeship could swerve him a hair's-breadth from the eye-for-an-eye edict of the Law.**

WITH a quick sweep of his arm, without checking for an instant the speed of the light canoe he was driving recklessly down the narrow, tortuous stream, Sergeant George Manning, of the Mounted, thrust his limp service hat under the surface and carried it back to his head. The scooped up water drenched his head and shoulders, and soaked the handkerchief that covered his nose and mouth.

Manning was fighting for his life.

High overhead heavy clouds, expanding and bursting into monstrous, fantastic shapes as they swept along on the strong east wind, rolled over the tree tops and covered the North Woods like a huge, billowing blanket. Fire, that great, devastating terror, was racing after the smoke with the speed of the wind.

Its was Manning's first trip into the Yellow River country, and he was staking his life on the correctness of the map furnished by the department. If the engineers had made no mistake, Pine Creek should soon swing westward, giving him a straight-away run of about a mile to Caribou Lake, a body of water large enough to insure safety.

Crouching on one knee, he threw all the strength of his powerful shoulders into the stroke and strained his eyes for the turn, his only hope.

The air was stifling. Thick pungent smoke filtered down through the tall spruces and choked him. A racking cough tore his lungs—every breath was torture. Tears ran from his smarting eyes, almost blinding him.

Every second brought the fire nearer. The low-tone, monotonous roar, at first faint like the rumble of distant surf, was growing louder, and the air was becoming hotter.

One moment his hopes were soaring; the next instant they dropped into the depths of despair. He began to doubt the map. Those two curving blue lines—they were wrong! What did a turn, more or less, in the course of an obscure little stream mean to the men who drew them?

"Damn them . . . damn them!" he gritted, catching the water savagely with his paddle. "I might have had—"

The canoe plunged through an overhanging bush and struck the bank, hurling him forward on his hands!

"Thank God . . . the bend!" he gasped, quickly thrusting the paddle into the gravel bottom. "Only a mile—then—"

A choking cry checked his muttering.

"Help . . . help!"

He sprang to his feet. His blood-shot eyes strained to pierce the haze . . . . then he saw! Only a few feet away, a man on his hands and knees! Someone else caught in the net of flame . . . . crawling hopelessly for a place of safety!

"Quick . . . . quick!" he cried hoarsely. "Jump . . . . jump!"

"I'm caught . . . . trap!" came the moaning answer.

The next instant, Manning was ashore bending over the fallen man.

The jaws of a heavy, double-spring bear trap were closed on the right ankle! A strong chain ran to a staple in a nearby trees.

WITH the strength of desperation, for he knew that only a few seconds stood between him and death, Manning tried to force down the springs. He could not move them.

"Here . . . . take this!"

Manning stared—the man was holding out a hunting knife!

"Use it . . . . quick!"

"You mean—" Manning hesitated.

"Cut off the foot, or . . . . finish me!"

With a shudder, Manning seized the knife.

Rushing death was roaring greedily for

*Only a few feet away, a man on his hands and knees! Someone else caught in the net of flame. . . .*

them. Flaming sparks, darting downward like tiny comets, were dropping by the thousand. Most of them flickered out on striking the ground; but here and there one hardier than the rest survived, and a little flame curled upward.

Gritting his teeth, Manning reached down.

"I'll get you out! Stand up!" he yelled, heaving the man to his feet. "Steady!"

With the trap upright, he balanced, a foot on each spring. Gripping the man's leg to keep from falling, he stooped and jammed the knife handle between the steel jaws. As the springs gave under his weight, he forced them apart.

"Easy . . . . I'll say when! Now—slow . . . . little more . . . . there!"

The foot was free! Manning jumped, and the jaws snapped.

"Quick!"

He caught the staggering man as he was sinking down and dragged him to the canoe. A moment later he was shooting down the stream, with Caribou Lake a mile away—a mile with hell howling at their heels.

The heat on his back was like a blast from a furnace. The rushing wall of flame was close behind. He could see the little puffs of steam when the large sparks struck the water; but he could not hear the hiss he knew they made. The stranger's lips moved, but he could not hear a word.

The man was pointing to the north. Of course, safety lay in that direction, but it would be sure death to take to the woods. Heat had made him delirious! In an effort to make himself heard, he started to crawl toward the stern. Manning ordered him back with a curse neither heard. Again he shouted and pointed so vehemently that Manning looked.

The nearness of the inferno was driving the low-lying smoke to higher levels, and Manning saw, almost abreast of them, a break in the solid line of underbrush.

His heart leaped! It was the mouth of a little stream!

As if he read Manning's thoughts, the stranger nodded wildly, then jerked the spare paddle from under the thwart and caught the water. Two quick strokes turned them, and they flew into the narrow channel. It was win or lose in the creek—they could not turn back.

Manning did not attempt to guide—he left that to the man in the bow whose life depended on his knowledge of the course. His trust was not misplaced. They darted under a fallen tree that bridged the stream, grazed a jagged boulder, and swung around projecting bushes and snags without once slackening speed.

Behind, the fire had leaped the creek. Little patches of curling flame were springing up abreast of them—the advance guard of the leaping, seething mass less than a hundred yards away.

For a half a mile, they ran the gauntlet of blistering heat and blazing branches that rained upon them, working in perfect unison; then the strain began to tell—it was more than man could stand. The strokes became erratic—it was each man for himself.

How far they must go, and what lay beyond, Manning had no idea; but he did know that the end was near. It was only a question of time. Hope had vanished, yet he continued to ply his paddle doggedly.

Sometimes, when a man is face to face with certain death, his thoughts turn from the danger to things far away. It was so with Manning—he was wondering if Inspector Jenkins would ever know how he died . . . . when he saw open water ahead!

A LAKE! The sight brought strength to his lagging arms.

It was small. The hanging smoke-clouds, reflecting dull red, gave it a dreadful, unearthly appearance, but it was paradise after hell. To draw a breath that did not scorch! To escape the terrible shriveling heat!

To the north, where a counter air current was rolling back the invading clouds, a tiny island arose in mid-lake. Tree-clad to the water's edge, with a perfectly arched skyline and a round bare rock for the southern extremity, it had the appearance of a crouching animal.

This was their goal, and without a pause they forged on until they were behind the sheltering bulk of the rock.

Manning pulled off the handkerchief mask and bathed his face. The stranger leaned over and drank from his cupped hand. Neither spoke. They relaxed and watched the great fire rolling unabated to the south.

Finally the stranger extended his hand. "Thanks, old man," he said simply.

"Same to you, stranger," answered Manning, clasping the hand.

THEY were typical outdoor men, with health, strength, and youth—neither over thirty. In build, both were broad-shouldered, with slim waists, and no superfluous flesh. With that the similarity ended. Manning had light, curly hair, blue eyes, and clean shaven face. The stranger's eyes were steel-gray, hair straight and brown, and a short, reddish-brown beard covered his face.

Manning next broke the silence.

"In the trap long?" he asked, wetting the grimy handkerchief and pressing it to his smarting eyes.

"About five hours. Think I could've worked out, if the fire hadn't broke loose." He reached down and began to unlace the heavy moose-hide pack from his injured ankle. "My name's Dunn—Phil Dunn. Been up here about two years—trapping. This morning, I left my canoe on the Pine and started over a last year's line. That old bear trap—one of my own I'd forgotten—grabbed me before I'd gone far. Lucky for me you came along; and lucky for you I was there—you'd never have reached Caribou. If we hadn't pulled into Porcupine—"

Manning lowered the handkerchief with a start. "Is this Porcupine Lake?" he asked quickly.

"Nothing else—this rock's the head of the sleeping porky," declared Dunn. "You've heard of it?"

"I have. I'm George Manning, and I'm after a man said to be located on Porcupine."

"Then I'm your man!" laughed Dunn. "Nobody else here."

"You won't do," grinned Manning. "The fellow I want has a bad scar running from his left temple to his chin—one that beard of yours wouldn't cover. From what I'm able to see of you, Phil, you'd be a pretty respectable looking chap, if you'd mow the whiskers."

Dunn touched his ankle gingerly. "Many thanks," he grimaced.

"By George! I forgot that foot!" cried Manning, leaning down. "Swing around—I'll take a look."

Dunn removed a woolen sock and extended his foot.

"Hu-u-um! You're lucky," announced Manning, working the ankle. "Badly bruised, but no bones broken. That bull-moose saved you—hold still." From his pack he took a first-aid kit and deftly applied a bandage. "There, that'll feel better! Now, lead me to your shack—I'm dirty and tired and hungry enough to eat boiled loon!"

IT was evening. The sky was cloudless. Off in the east, a haze of smoke that hung low over the smoldering forest was all that told of the great conflagration.

As the rosy glow of the sun faded, the orange-tinted rim of the big moon arose slowly from behind the pointed top of the spruces outlined on the sky. Only the lapping of the little waves on the narrow gravel beach, and the gentle sighing of the light breeze broke the stillness. It was too early for the usual sounds of night-life in the forest; or perhaps the inhabitants had not recovered from their fright of the afternoon.

On a bench before a small, well-built log cabin near the shore, Manning and Dunn smoked and gazed along the shimmering, silvery pathway that ran over the rippling surface from the water's edge to the full moon, now free from the tree-line.

"Phil," said Manning abruptly, "where is Barker?"

Dunn looked up in surprise. "I knew you were after Ben," he said slowly, "but I didn't think you knew his name."

"We've known it since the night of the murder," said Manning. "Two weeks ago we heard he was here with you. I want him."

Dunn shook his head. "You're too late, George."

"He's gone?"

"Six weeks ago."

"North?"

"Or south, or east, or west," agreed Dunn.

For several minutes they smoked in silence, then Manning knocked his pipe on the edge of the bench.

"You know he murdered a man in Dalton?" he asked.

"I know only this—that he killed a

skunk in self-defense," retorted Dunn.

"By shooting him in the back!" snapped Manning.

Dunn stared at the trooper, his pipe in mid-air. "Ben Barker never shot a man in the back!" he said slowly.

"The bullet that killed James Duncan entered under the left shoulder blade and went through the heart," declared Manning.

"I don't care who told you that—it's a lie!"

"That's right, Phil, stick up for your friend," said Manning. "All we know is that Barker suddenly appeared in Duncan's shop and opened fire. A half-breed, Joe Charlevois, working in the back room, heard Duncan call Barker's name, and ran is as Duncan fell. Joe tried to stop Barker, but he got away with his left cheek slashed."

AS the trooper paused to light his pipe, Dunn remarked: "Some different from Ben's story."

"No reason, as I can see, for Joe to lie—"

"A half-breed lies without reason," broke in Dunn.

"Well," Manning went on rather sharply, "at least he gave us Barker's name and said he saw a long sunken scar under the right collar bone, when Barker's shirt was torn open in the scuffle."

"That much is true—I've seen it many a time," granted Dun. He puffed a cloud of smoke upward and when it had drifted away, he exclaimed bitterly: "Justice! You've condemned him, sentenced him, and are all set for the hanging . . . . all on the word of a lying half-breed!"

"We'll listen to the other side when I take Barker in," said Manning grimly.

"You won't have to wait that long," exclaimed Dunn, swinging around to face the trooper. "I know—I'll tell you!"

"I'm willing—shoot!"

For a moment, Dunn gazed silently at the rippling water; then he began abruptly.

"I came to Porcupine because I wanted to be alone. It's miles from anywhere, and I never expected to meet anyone here; but I was wrong—Barker came in right on my heels, and I couldn't refuse to share camp with him. I intended to move on the next day, but he was such a likable chap I put it off. We built this cabin and had just time to make a trip to the Post on Lake Peter for supplies . . . . then things broke.

"We were both green, and winter caught us—sewed us up tight before we knew it was on us. It wasn't long before rations got low, and we had a pretty tough time. We froze together and starved together, and when spring break-up came I knew him as well as I knew myself. If there's any bad in a man, it'll come to the top when food is so scarce every bite has to be counted."

As Dunn paused, Manning nodded. "Correct," he declared; "winter here would bring out every drop of yellow. Now, that explains how you got together . . . . what about the fight?"

"So you'll understand, I'll go back a little," said Dunn, striking a match and holding it over his pipe. "Barker and Jim Duncan were partners for several years—general store in southern Ontario, and were doing well. Everything went fine until Barker caught Duncan robbing the safe. Before he recovered from the shock, Duncan shot him and fled. To save Barker's life, a rib was resected—that left the scar your half-breed saw."

"And when he recovered," said Manning, "he oiled his gun and started after Duncan!"

"When he left the hospital," answered Dunn evenly, "he was stone broke. He said he had only one thought—to recover from Duncan, and put him behind the bars."

Manning shrugged and smiled skeptically. "Yet he carried a gun and . . . . used it!"

"He was hunting a man who had once shot him down," said Dunn. "I believed him, for a man tells the truth, when the temperature is fifty below and not a week's rations in sight. For over a year he hunted Duncan. Finally, he saw him in the street in Dalton and followed him to his shop.

"The instant Duncan saw him, he dodged behind a side counter and started shooting. It was kill or be killed with Barker, so in self-defense he returned the fire until his gun was empty. As no sound came from Duncan, he hastily reloaded and darted to the rear of the shop, where he could look up behind the counter. He saw

Duncan stretched out, then the half-breed leaped from a door behind him. A shot would have saved him that cut cheek, but Barker was no killer—he knocked the half-breed out and escaped."

Manning frowned thoughtfully. "Why did he run away?" he asked.

"Couldn't take a chance with the half-breed as witness."

"Why did he come here?"

"He'd been in once before, on a hunting trip."

"Why did he leave?"

"The guide, who brought him in before, found us here; Barker feared he would tell the police—as he did."

"He should have stayed and faced the music," said Manning.

"And been hanged!" exclaimed Dunn. "Didn't that half-breed accuse him of murder?"

Manning did not answer. His eyes were fixed on the lake.

The long silence that followed was finally broken by the eerie cry of a loon from the meadows along the shore; then a little screech-owl, emboldened by the sound, began to wail tremulously from his perch on a nearby pine. In the forest across the lake a young timberwolf howled mournfully at the rising moon. The wood folk were awakening.

Manning knocked out his pipe and got to his feet.

"Phil," he said earnestly, "I hope I don't find your friend Barker. If I do, he goes in."

"I understand, George," said Dunn; "but I don't agree. Ben will never rest easy until he's cleared. I know the country—I'll help you find him."

THIRTY-SIX hours later, Manning and Dunn shot the miniature rapids on Squaw Creek and started down Elbow Lake—a long, narrow pond with a creek very like an elbow near the middle. They headed straight for the point on the inside of the crook which was formed by a narrow rocky ledge, terminating in a huge, preglacial boulder. With two paddles working, they soon reached it.

"Better landing on the other side," announced Dunn, paddling bow. "From the top of that rock you can sweep the whole lake and if there's anyone here which isn't—" he stopped the canoe with a quick back stroke.

"What's wrong?" asked Manning in surprise.

Dunn pointed to a thin wisp of smoke spiraling upwards over the rock. "Never found anyone here before," he declared, swinging the bow to shore and easing up on a flat rock. "Won't do any harm to look him over before he sees us."

"You ought to be on the force, Phil," said Manning with an approving chuckle. "Wait here—I'll climb the ridge and see if I know him."

Dunn waited until the trooper had wormed his way over the top, then he pushed off.

"I'll take a peep from the water side," he muttered. He had almost reached the point, when he drew in the paddle, leaned back and laughed softly. "It's contagious—caught it from Manning! Why, at any other time, I wouldn't have thought anything about that smoke! I'd have let out a yell and gone in to shake hands and—"

The sharp crack of a gun interrupted him!

A rifle! And Manning's rifle was in the canoe! With a vicious stroke, Dunn shot the canoe around the point and stared across the little moss-carpeted clearing.

A black-bearded giant with gun half raised was advancing cautiously toward a still, huddled figure lying at the base of the sloping rock!

"Pierre Boucher!" gritted Dunn, drawing his revolver and leaping as the canoe slid noiselessly up on a tuft of water grass.

A twinge of pain from his injured ankle warned him to go slowly, but he did not heed. He had something else to think about—Pierre Boucher! The treacherous guide .... he had driven his partner away .... he had killed George Manning!

Dunn could have shot him, but he set his teeth and ran. He would hang him! He would try him, judge him, sentence him and leave him hanging over Manning's grave!

Suddenly, as he ran, a wave of relief swept over him. Manning was alive .... he raised himself on his hands! Then the relief changed to rage .... Pierre Boucher stopped and deliberately raised his gun!

Crack!

Dunn fired from the hip and missed—

but the shot turned the big guide's attention from Manning.

Boucher whirled and fired at the very instant Dunn's ankle gave way, throwing him heavily. The revolver flew from Dunn's hand and fell several feet away. He raised on his knees, but dropped quickly as a bullet sang by his head. All thought of hanging vanished. He started to crawl for the gun.

A bullet splashed dirt into his face! Another plowed the moss close to his hand as his fingers closed on the butt!

From where he lay, he fired twice, then paused. Pierre Boucher's arms dropped to his sides. He turned on his heels and swayed unsteadily. He stumbled, recovered quickly and, before Dunn realized what he was about, lurched into the dense woods and . . . . disappeared.

With a roar of rage, Dunn sprang to his feet and hobbled painfully after him.

"Phil—stop!" Manning was sitting up, his hands pressed to his thigh. "Stay out of the woods—he'll get you! He can't get away . . . . he's hard hit!"

Dunn hesitated, then limped back quickly.

"Where did he get you?" he asked anxiously.

"Through the leg—the fall knocked me out," answered the trooper. "But he'd have finished me a minute ago if you hadn't taken a hand. Thanks, Phil; we're more than square."

"Forget it and tell me how the devil he got you in the leg? You went over head first!"

"I couldn't see him, and was dropping down to a ledge when he plugged me," grimaced Manning. "Here, give me a hand—"

"Sit still!" commanded Dunn. "Don't even think till I have a look at that leg."

Disregarding Manning's protest, he limped to the canoe and returned with the first aid kit.

"Now, lean, lean back . . . . ah-h-h!" he sighed with relief, when he had bared the wound. Missed the bone—went clear through! Ten days and you'll forget which leg it was!"

He applied a moist antiseptic dressing, then arose and inspected his work. "Pretty fair for an amateur, eh?"

"Feels better already," declared Manning. "As you say it doesn't amount to much, but it stops our search."

"Yes," answered Dunn, glancing regretfully toward the woods. "We'll have to let Pierre Boucher go for—"

"What?—you know him?" cried Manning in surprise.

"He's the guide who brought Barker in—who dropped in on us. Wonder what he's been up to—he shot on sight."

"If he hadn't, I'd have got him!" snapped the trooper. "He took Nathan Levi, a Montreal Banker, into the woods, and a week later Levi was found below Nelson's Falls—a bullet through his head."

Dunn stooped and lifted Manning. "Well, we know where he is, we'll get him later. Now, my job is to get you home."

They started for the canoe, one hopping and the other limping.

"We're a fine pair to draw to," grunted Manning between hops. "Just two good legs between us!"

SEVEN weeks passed before Manning was fit for duty. He did not make the rapid recovery Dunn predicted. The wound was trivial, but the loss of blood and the hard journey from Elbow Lake left him without resistance to fight off the infection that developed.

The first aid kit was small, was soon exhausted. To meet the emergency, Dunn washed and boiled the used dressings; but the dreaded infection developed, and Manning's condition became serious. Supplies were absolutely necessary, and so Dunn placed the things that might be needed within the trooper's reach, and made a record-breaking trip to the Post. With antiseptics and dressings, the infection was checked.

THEN, one night, Manning said he was ready to start out.

"No hurry, George," objected Dunn, "Rest another week."

They were lounging in the rough, home-made chairs before a big spruce log that blazed in the stone fire-place, for the nights were already so cold a fire was necessary for comfort. By day, the chill in the air told that fall, the short and sometimes almost indistinguishable interval between summer and winter, was not far away.

"I've been resting over a week now! I'm fit for anything," declared Manning,

working his leg vigorously. "Tomorrow, I'm off for the Elbow. I'll look around a bit, for Pierre can't be far away."

"And if you find him?"

"I'll beat it! Can't waste any more time, for the weather's liable to break any day."

"If you weren't so damned bull-headed," growled Dunn, "you'd make a bee-line for Dalton now."

Manning laughed as he filled his pipe and struck a match.

"Phil," he said sobering, "do you mind if I ask you something—something that's been on my mind for a long time?"

"Shoot away!"

Manning gazed at him a moment, then asked abruptly:

"Why have you buried yourself in the woods? Of course," he went on quickly, as Dunn's expression changed, "it's none of my business—needn't answer if you'd rather not."

Dunn scowled silently at the dancing flames.

"I know you're not hiding," Manning continued. "No man could live two months with you and think you capable of crime."

"Thanks, George," said Dunn quickly. "I've never done anything I really regret—my conscience is clear. Sometime, I'll tell you about it . . . . not now."

"Righto!" said the trooper. "Now, here's a question you can answer—have you any family ties?"

Dunn shook his head. "All alone in the world."

"Then why not join the service?" exclaimed Manning arising. "It'll give you something to live for!"

"Me? Join the Mounted?" cried Dunn aghast at the thought.

"Why not?" demanded the trooper. "For a year, you'd work with a regular, and I'll see that you're teamed with me!"

"But I—I never—" stammered Dunn.

"I want you, Phil . . . . will you come?"

After a moment's hesitation, Dunn arose quickly and gripped Manning's hand.

"Sergeant Manning, meet Trooper Dunn," he said solemnly. "Tomorrow we'll run up to the Elbow, then—"

A sound from outside made them stare in astonishment.

"E-e-e-ah!"

Someone on the lake! The cry was repeated.

"E-e-e-ah!" The sound rang over the water.

Dunn threw open the door, and they hurried out.

"Hello!" called Manning.

"Hello!" came back from the water.

A canoe appeared in the moonlight, and a moment later ran up on the shore. A man sprang out and came to the cabin. He was an Indian.

"Billie!" exclaimed Dunn, waving him inside. "What are you doing so far from the Post?"

"Campbell send letter," answered the Indian, pulling an envelope from his shirt and passing it to Manning.

Wondering why Thomas Campbell, the factor at Lake Peter, would be writing to him, the trooper hastily opened it.

"Pretty chilly out, Billie—pull up a chair," said Dunn. "Had anything to eat? No? Well, I'll soon throw something—"

"Campbell has forwarded orders from headquarters," interrupted Manning. "I'm called in, Phil, so we'll have to leave Pierre Boucher till next spring." He held the paper so Dunn could see and chuckled.

"See that? There's your name—'Philip Dunn!' You're included in the orders! I was so sure of you, I told Inspector Jenkins about you in the report you carried to the Post last month—how you saved my life—that you'll be a credit to the force."

"And what does he say?" asked Dunn quickly.

"Listen to this," answered Manning, reading: " 'From your report, Philip Dunn is the type of man we want. Bring him in with you. As to your suggestion that he be paired with you, I believe that can be arranged; but, in fairness to Dunn, make it clear that your territory is one of the hardest, and a tough job for a new man.' "

"The harder, the better!" cried Dunn, his eyes sparkling. "We'll hang a 'To Let' sign on the door and start in the morning!"

Billie, who had been squatting on the floor before the fire, looked up.

"You say you leave Pierre," he remarked. "No good—he go."

Both men whirled on him.

"What's that?" demanded the trooper.

"I see him on Otter today, when I come down West Branch. He don't see me—he go up creek slow like tired."

Dunn jerked his poncho from a peg and spread it on the floor. He began to pack.

"You keep house tonight, Billie," he snapped; "and when you leave, shut the door!"

Manning's eyes sparkled. "Phil," he exclaimed, "I'm making a prediction—if you stay in the harness five years, you'll be holding down an inspector's job!"

"We've got to be on our way, if we expect to get him, haven't we?" demanded Dunn. "We're breaking camp a little earlier than we thought, that's all."

Manning chuckled, as he started to make up his pack; and Billie, seeing that he had been forgotten, arose and glided to the shelf that held the provisions.

AS Pierre Boucher had not gone up the West Branch, Manning decided, and Dunn agreed, that the big half-breed was taking a roundabout way west to cut out the Post—that he would follow the Round Lake, Cedar Creek, Basset's Pond trail and make camp for the night somewhere near the pond, where they hoped to surprise him.

With that object in view they set out, two grim-faced men who knew there would be a fight unless Pierre was taken unaware.

Midnight found them stealing up Otter Creek. The only sound in the stillness of the forest was the soft swish of the water curling around the spruce paddles. Their strokes were easy and seemingly effortless, yet the force behind them shot the little canoe swiftly ahead against the current.

At daybreak, as the first rays of the rising sun struck the surface of Basset's Pond, they emerged cautiously from the mouth of Cedar Creek and landed.

"We've lost our chance to catch him sleeping—he's on his way now," said Dunn, glancing around. "He must have made camp—"

"Right here!" exclaimed Manning, bending over the remains of a fire. Scattering the ashes with his foot, he dug a hole with his knife and thrust in his hand. "Ground's warm—he hasn't been gone a half hour!"

"Wait a minute!" called Dunn, as the trooper started for the canoe. "Are you sure about the time—half an hour?"

"Positive!" declared Manning. "He isn't a mile away now."

"Then we can head him off, if you don't object to a little mud and water," announced Dunn. "Crooked Creek meanders all over the country and finally comes back to within a mile of the pond . . . . but half of that mile is beaver marsh."

"Well, we're losing time—let's go!"

Across the pond they raced. Leaving the canoe and their packs, they plunged into the unbroken forest. For a short distance the ground was solid, then they came to the edge of a treacherous looking swamp—the beaver marsh.

"Come on!" called Dunn, as Manning stopped. "I know the way—I've been through it!"

He jumped to a tuft of grass, slipped off and plowed ahead, knee-deep in the black mud. With a bound, Manning was after him.

To make time was impossible. The oozing muck gripped their legs and held with a tenacity that threatened to strip the pacs from their feet. Half buried trunks of once great trees barred their passage, and the tough roots of the swamp grass tripped them and threw them into the reeking mire.

Hand in hand they floundered on until they reached solid ground.

"We've beat him, Phil! We've won!" gasped Manning.

"Not till we . . . . reach the creek," panted Dunn, staggering ahead through a clump of silvery birch. "It's right here—"

He stopped abruptly. On the bank of the Creek, he saw Pierre Boucher, gun raised—saw him just in time to drop as the rifle cracked.

With a whoop of exultation, Pierre leaped.

Dunn's hand flew to his holster, groping wildly. It was empty—the revolver had been lost in the swamp! He was helpless! With an effort, he tore his eyes from the rage-distorted face of the half-breed and flashed a glance at Manning. He saw the trooper whip up his gun and fire.

Pierre Boucher stopped with a grunting cough. His eyes dilated—he staggered, then lurched on toward Dunn.

"I . . . . get you!" he snarled.

Again Manning's gun cracked.

The rifle dropped from Pierre's hands. His knees sagged, but he straightened up by will power alone. For an instant, he balanced unsteadily, then he raised on his

toes, half turned and fell across Dunn.

With his revolver ready for instant use, Manning advanced cautiously and rolled the big half-breed over on his back.

"He's gone, Phil—Pierre Boucher has cheated the hangman," he announced. "Our work is done—we can go in."

Slowly Dunn arose. He gazed a moment at the man on the ground, then turned to Manning.

"George," he said solmenly, 'as I laid there with no means of defense, I saw death in the muzzle of Pierre's gun. I didn't fear it, but I didn't want to go before I squared myself with you."

"Squared yourself?" repeated Manning. "Why, man, you did that long ago!"

"No, I deceived you about Barker—I didn't want you to find him," said Dunn huskily. "He never was very far away—he was nearby all the time, but you wouldn't have known him . . . . had you see him. He has no scar on his face! Joe Charlevois saw a stream of blood from a little scalp wound—that's all. Pierre knew and thought I set you after him.

He paused and raised his hands to his throat.

"Well?" said Manning.

With a jerk, Dunn tore open his shirt. There was a long, sunken scar under the right collar bone!

"I took Dunn's name, when he left me," he said steadily. "I'm ready—take me in, George."

There was triumph in Manning's smile. He scarcely glanced at the scar.

"That's no news to me, Phil," he exclaimed. "You had no scar on your face, but I suspected you from the first. I knew the truth a month ago—I saw the scar on your chest, when you leaned over to dress my leg!"

"You knew . . . . a month ago!"

"Yes, but I wanted you to tell me."

"And—and you recommended me . . . . asked me to join . . . . to pal with you—"

"Phil, I—"

"Ben, you mean. From now on I'll use my own name."

"Too late for me to change—you'll always be Phil," declared Manning. "I asked you to join because I believed your story. Now, I've another little secret—it came in the Inspector's letter last night, and I kept it for this occasion. After I left Dalton, Joe Charlevois was cut to pieces in a drunken fight. Before he died, he confessed. He hated Duncan and took advantage of the shooting to put in a shot for himself—he shot Duncan in the back!"

"Then . . . . I didn't kill . . . ."

There was a suspicion of moisture in Phil's eyes as he turned and looked over the black, treacherous marsh. Like the last two years, he had fought his way through it . . . . he was on solid ground at last.

Suddenly he faced Manning.

"I can hardly believe it, George!" he exclaimed. "I'm free . . . . free to go wherever I please!"

"Free!" snorted Manning scornfully. "Where do you get that free stuff? Free? I'll say you're not! For the next year you take orders from me!"

For an instant, Phil looked puzzled; then he straightened stiffly and saluted.

"At your service, Sergeant!"

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# Spoilers of Paradise Valley

## By ROGER DANIELS

**A valley of life in a land of frozen death. A golden-haired goddess in an Eden of a savage, lost race. Through screaming blizzards Corporal Peters sought them —his only sign-posts a madman's ravings and a skeleton's long-stilled boast!**

***A Novel of the Far Country***

"MON Pere! *Le bon Dieu. . . .*" Out of the night and the North, Alcide Jacquard burst into the cabin of Gordon, the missionary, on the lonely reaches of the lower Mackenzie.

For half the long Arctic night Gordon had been waiting for Jacquard's return, a vigil now of nearly three months, but he had looked for no such pitiful end-of-the-trail appearance as this.

It was seven months since the Geological Survey, for which Jacquard had acted as guide, had given up its search for prehistoric deposits and had passed back through the river trading posts bound for home. But Jacquard had not come with them. The leader of the expedition had said something about "hare-brained."

That was no new tale to Gordon. There were many who had hinted that Alcide was a half-wit, for all that he knew the trackless ice fields and tundra as a cat at night knows a neighborly alley.

Gordon did not forget the time when he lay helpless with a broken leg and the signs of tetanus beginning to show. It was Jacquard who had fought his way through a week-old blizzard to Fort Murray and had brought back Peters, acting Post surgeon. Peters, too, was one of the few who had a liking for Jacquard and credited the

guide with more wisdom than many of the half-breed's weird notions would countenance in others.

So when the flaming red and green and gold curtain of the Aurora Borealis sent its great folds rolling across the northern sky to proclaim the coming of the Arctic night Gordon prepared to wait it out for Jacquard.

Always before the half-breed had come to the little cabin with a smile that showed his even white teeth. Now, he lay where he had fallen, an inert heap of numbed flesh and fur, on the floor of the cabin.

Gordon sprang from the table, where he had been reading, to lift the unconscious figure in his strong arms and bear it to the rude bunk in the corner. Jacquard was like a dead man. Gordon virtually tore the parka from him and with his clasp knife hacked away the frozen boot lacings.

When he put his hand to the heel of a boot to pull it off the knowledge that comes to a man who has lived long in the North

told him that the foot was frozen. So he went to work again with the knife, cutting away the boot.

Several hours passed before Jacquard opened his eyes; breathless, almost frantic hours for Gordon. His medical training consisted of a thoroughgoing first aid. He had rubbed the half-breed's frozen feet and hands with snow. He had swathed him in heated blankets. But Jacquard needed more than first aid. When finally he did open his eyes it was to give the missionary another shock.

"Blind, mon Pere," he whispered, putting a bandaged hand to his face. "Two, t'ree day since everyt'ing she go red."

"Good Lord!" Gordon bent over the bunk to stare helplessly into the unseeing eyes. "How under heaven did you get here, Alcide?"

"How the leetle mole she find his way, eh, mon Pere? *Le bon Dieu,* he geev the mole no eye. How she find his way? By gar! Alcide he crawl here by his nose just lak the leetle mole she crawl!"

Jacquard's arm fell and he slipped back in the blankets. Gordon clenched his fists and turned to walk up and down the small room.

Suffering was not a new thing to him, nor was death. But after his long wait, to have Alcide come back to him broken by the Arctic weighed down on him until he could have cried out to high heaven in his anguish. Instead he knelt in prayer, and his prayer was that the end of suffering might come quickly. He was still on his knees before the bunk when he felt the half-breed move. Jacquard raised himself painfully to an elbow. His blank eyes turned vacantly toward the missionary.

"MEBBE, mon Pere don' ask Alcide why he come back, eh?"

Gordon tried to answer and choked.

"Why Alcide don' care one damn if he lose dogs, eh? Why he don' care one damn if he lose t'ousan' dog, eh?"

It was a living horror to have to stand and stare into those unseeing eyes. Gordon heard what the half-breed said like a man under the grip of a terrible nightmare. Every word came to him as in a dream and he was powerless to answer, powerless even to move. He prayed dumbly that the agony of the man before him might be his own, yet knowing that the prayer was futile. All he could do was to stand there helpless and alone. The cruel torture of the journey back to civilization had driven Alcide mad.

As if the man on the bunk had read his thoughts Gordon heard him whisper:

"Mebbe, mon Pere, he t'ink Alcide he go, w'at you call him? Off his nut, eh? By gar!" The half-breed showed his teeth in a leering grin. Then he leaned forward and went on almost in a mad frenzy.

"All his life Alcide he look for somet'ing. Mebbe, mon Pere, he ask w'at it is Alcide he find? Eh? Mebbe mon Pere he lak to know himself w'at she is?" A maudlin laugh rang through the room.

Gordon shuddered. The fear and loneliness he had felt looming up around him descended with a menacing suddenness as he sensed the cunning with which Jacquard was trying in his mad way to cloak his insane dream.

"Come, come, Alcide, you're all right now, lie quiet." He tried to put assurance into the words, but his voice sounded hollow.

The half-breed, if he heard, gave no sign. He merely grinned.

"How you lak be king, eh, mon Pere? She is fine to be king! Have beautiful wife, eh? Two, t'ree, mebbe ten wife! She is fine job, eh, mon Pere? You t'ink Alcide mean squaw. Mais oui, thees woman he is white. White, mon Pere, lak when gold she is white! And eyes, mon Pere! Thees woman he has eyes so blue lak the sky! Alcide he go crazee, w'at you t'ink?"

Jacquard sank down. Gordon pulled the covers up over him and then went back to his table. All he could do was wait; he knew that. He knew also that the real task before him was to keep his own mind clear of this mad dream that had taken possession of the half-breed's brain. One maniac in a cabin above the Arctic circle was enough.

But there was something strangely insidious in the dream and in Alcide's manner of telling it. He tried to read, but instead of the printed words, those poor blank eyes kept staring at him from the page. He shut the book with a slam. The next moment he repented of his nerves. Jacquard was stirring again.

"Mon Pere, he don't t'ink there really ees king, eh? He wonder how she come there ees king? He t'ink Alcide he tell? Mon Pere, he don' t'ink thees king she has ivoree w'at you call throne? He don' t'ink there ees ivoree room ten times so big as thees shack. Mebbe, mon Pere, Alcide he come back so he could file claim!"

Again the half-breed was quiet and this time the missionary took good care not to disturb him. There was less mockery in the tone of the last speech and to Gordon it seemed that, even in his madness, Alcide was struggling to convince himself that something he had dreamed was really true.

AS a young man Gordon had known the Barbary Coast. He knew the "white flower" dreams of the opium smokers. He had seen the subtle poppy work just such wreckage of the mind of a man the privations of the Arctic had evidently wrought with Jacquard. And the half-breed's dream was much like an opium vagary.

Of course there was no connection with the two, but the other helped him to get hold of himself. He had tended many a drug-soaked wreck. Why should a man driven insane by exposure put his own nerves on edge?

He tried to shake off the feeling of loneliness. Ever since the Geological Survey party had gone through he had waited with the knowledge that Alcide would come back. He knew they had gone looking for fossils. The half-breed might have gained his ivory notion from them.

A well-known explorer had claimed to have found a race of white Eskimos. When madness takes hold of the mind fantasies quickly become facts. There was enough of actual fact to have given Alcide the beginning of his dream. Then had come the loss of reason and the dream had spread its bounds.

So Gordon tried to think it out for the sake of keeping his own mind clear. Without knowing it he dropped off to sleep. He awoke with Jacquard's cry echoing through the room.

"Mon Pere! . . . *Le bon Dieu!* . . ."

Gordon sprang to the door. Half way there he was wide awake. It was that first cry of Alcide's which had rung in his ears. And now in his haste he had knocked back his chair with a thud.

The figure on the bunk stirred and Gordon tip-toed softly over. But the sightless eyes were closed. Only a low moan came from the sleeper. The missionary bent over him and noticed that the half-breed scarcely breathed. The moaning ceased. Then an expression of pain that turned suddenly to a smile passed over Jacquard's tired face.

"Alcide." Gordon spoke low.

But the half-breed did not hear. Even as the missionary spoke his name a purple shadow came like a sudden flush to Jacquard's cheeks. Gordon had seen the shadow of death before. His prayer that suffering might end quickly had been answered.

A sob that was half grief and half thankfulness caught in his throat as he dropped to his knees beside the dead.

## II

GORDON picked up the little cylinder of white bone and held it on the palm of his hand, idly balancing it, as a man does when he guesses the weight of an object. He, too, was judging its weight but not in terms of pounds and ounces. The ivory talisman impressed him as an extraordinary proof of the frailty of man. That Jacquard of all men should have succumbed to its subtle mystery!

It was with the sense that he held in his hand the chief cause of the half-breed's death that he reached up and placed it back on the hewn log above the fireplace which served as a shelf.

It was folly to think that trivial things like this could possess supernatural powers exerting an uncanny influence over the possessor. There were precious stones which had gained notoriety because of such tales woven about them. Gordon did not believe in such things but nevertheless he was glad when he no longer held the cylinder in his hand.

The Far North is superstitious. Many strange tales had come to his ears during the years of his mission work. Among the French-Canadian trappers the *loup garou,* or werewolf, was a common source of conversation. Gordon knew how easily such tales gained credence. He still recalled with a shudder his own sudden meeting with the albino wolf. How its pinkish eyes had glared at him from the under-

growth. Then the ghostlike movement as it loped off into the gloom. It had been just at dawn.

Such animals were freaks of nature, nothing more, but a freak met under unpropitious conditions is a hard thing to shake from one's mind. All that day every snow-covered bush he passed had sent a chill through his body. Even the dogs had snarled most of the way home. So does the weird and unknown haunt the mind of man and break down the courage of dumb brutes. In spite of himself his eyes roved to the ledge above the fireplace and sought out the ivory cylinder.

A cold sweat stood on his forehead at the thought that he, too, might even now be coming under its unknown spell.

"How you lak be king, eh, mon Pere?" The mad words still rang through the room.

And what was it Alcide had said about a woman "white lak gold she is white"?

Gordon was too old a hand at loneliness to know that if his present state of mind kept up he would be crazier than Jacquard was when he burst open the door of the cabin. He bundled himself in his parka and with an axe went out to cut a grave through the snow and ice.

THE exercise did him good and he was in a glow all over when he came back into the cabin an hour later. But it was no easy task to lay away the body of a friend in the cold tundra. He hunted through his dunnage bag for some bits of candle. Alcide would sleep better out there in the cold if a candle had burned at his bier.

A search of the half-breed's parka revealed a crucifix. Who was he to question the faith of any man? Besides it did him good to think of the spiritual side of the half-breed's life. In another age and time Alcide might have been swashbuckler and lover by turn.

There is nothing soft in life above the Arctic Circle. But there were things which Gordon knew had been dear to the half-breed in life. It was proper that they should be held dear to him in death.

He had waited months for Alcide. There was no reason why he should not sit a few hours longer in the little cabin by the side of his friend now that there was an end of waiting. To his tired mind it seemed restful just to sit there and watch the candles flicker. Man was like that. A candle flickering in a blustering world. Some kept the flame of life burning bright to the very end. In some lives the flame never seemed to go out but continued to burn brightly even after death.

And here was a man, true to the law of give and take, ready with an arm to help the weak, yet the flame of life was gone before half the course had run. All that remained now were a few flickering tallow candles.

Gordon was glad when morning came. At least he called it morning. He had sat twelve full hours beside the dead. Outside the winter night gave no gleam. He was a shadow bearing another shadow when he made his way to the grave he had dug with the axe. When that task was finished he turned to the axe again and ripped up a section of the floor. A cross would mark the place where Alcide lay.

When at last he came back and everything had been done—not another blessed thing to fill his mind—he sank down at his table and wept. Then it was that thoughts of the ivory cylinder took hold of him again.

He got up and brought it from the mantelpiece. Here was the thing responsible for Alcide's death. Where had it come from? Until he found it in the pocket of the half-breed's parka he had dismissed everything Jacquard had said as the mutterings of insanity. But ivory had been the burden of Alcide's wild tale. A whole room of ivory, "ten times so beeg as thees shack," were the half-breed's own words. He had spoken of an ivory throne, and the white woman—ivory was white—this cylinder was back of it all.

It was about seven inches in diameter and an inch to an inch and a quarter thick. Around the edge of it ran a series of hieroglyphics or pictographs. They were so small Gordon could not decide to which type of primitive writing the symbols belonged. Across the upper face of the cylinder was a design that he took to be an attempt at real picture making. The artist, whoever he might have been, had scratched mountains and valleys on the white surface.

But the more Gordon studied it, the deeper grew the feeling, that the real significance of the cylinder ran deeper than the

meaning of the figures scratched on its surface. The ones around the edge were much older than the design on the face. Further than that he could make no conjecture. He was puzzling over it when he fell asleep. When he awoke again it was to begin where he had left off.

So gradually the spell of the ivory cylinder took hold of him. The North and the long night vanished. Alcide came back and together they worked over the secret. There was a claim to be filed. He was to be king. It was in the land where golden women lived. There were ivory thrones, whole rooms of ivory.

Gordon laughed. He laughed again at the echo.

"How the leetle mole she find his way, eh?"

It was nice that Alcide had come back to talk to him. It was like Alcide to do that. But Gordon had known from the beginning that the little half-breed would come back. And in the spring they were going to the land of ivory—he and Jacquard—Jacquard whom he had buried out there in the snow.

## III

NEWS of men and events in the world outside filters slowly into the North. It comes to the dwellers of the tundra above the spruce line through the medium of month-old papers, infrequent letters and the like that are brought by the river steamers in summer and dog-teams when the rivers close.

So it was that into the R. N. W. M. P. post at Fort Murray word came telling that the red-bearded missionary in the lonely cabin on the delta of the Mackenzie had gone mad. And with the news came other rumors linked with superstition. Evil spirits were abroad in the land. Alcide Jacquard was not only dead but buried, and the wolves had howled over his grave. Worse than death hovered about the cabin on the lower Mackenzie.

"Constable Peters will proceed at once to the old Fort Retribution post and bring back James Gordon, reported insane."

Very formal, matter of fact and to the point ran the orders of the Mounted. That was all they had to answer to both news and rumor, "Get the man."

Much that is full of glamour has been written and told about the wearers of the Scarlet Tunics of the North. Much more that has nothing to do with glamour is the workaday rule of their lives. *Maintiens le droit* is a motto of service not of words. "According to the Code" is a phrase that accepts facts as facts. Glamour is something to be found in books.

WITHIN half an hour after he received the order from Inspector Curtot, Constable Peters swung into the North at the rear of a well-stocked sledge behind a team of eleven picked dogs. Fang, a husky he had reared from a puppy, was in the lead trace.

Peters was soldier and surgeon both. He was built, like every member of the Mounted is built, for action. Just under six feet, weighing close to two hundred, smooth shaven, clean cut, and with a jaw that did not need a lot of words to show he meant business.

Heads and hands were skilled in the knowledge and use of scalpel and bandage. But that could not hold him. His heart craved the open. In the North he found the place where heart and head and hands could meet on equal ground.

Three winters had slipped by since his first trip to the old post in which Gordon had made his home. That first trip Peters had made in a blizzard that the North remembered and he was new to the country. But Alcide Jacquard had been his guide on that occasion. Now Jacquard was dead and he was alone.

IT was on the tenth day after leaving Fort Murray that Peters came in sight of Gordon's shack. The broad reaches of the Mackenzie delta wind through a flat country and it took him nearly three hours to get within hailing distance after he first sighted the place.

There was no answer to his halloo. Peters had not really expected one, but still it gave him a doubt. Gordon might have gone off or died. He'd know in another minute or two. There was no answer to his knock either as he pushed open the door. Gordon sat on a corner of his bunk, gazing at the floor where the planks had been ripped up, his hands folded together between his knees. Peters walked across

the cabin and laid his hand on the missionary's shoulder without speaking. Gordon did not move.

Peters had seen the cross marking Alcide's grave as he approached the shack. That accounted for the planks missing from the floor. It was just about as he thought; Gordon's mind had gone out to Alcide.

"Poor devil. Well, we've got to get him out of here, that's certain. Hullo!"

His eye roving around the room caught sight of the ivory cylinder above the fireplace. He walked over and picking it up examined it closely before the fire. He turned to Gordon and saw that the missionary was watching him. He put the cylinder back on the mantle.

"Ivoree!"

Peters was looking at Gordon and saw the missionary's lips move. But it was Jacquard's voice that he heard. For the moment it startled him.

Gordon smiled, but it was a smile devoid of all sense of reason, just the blank grin of a man who has lost his mind.

"Mebbe I come back file claim, eh, mon Pere?"

Peters nodded. He knew now why Gordon had gone mad. But that told him nothing concerning Jacquard's death. "Ivoree," and this last about filing a claim. He knew Gordon was repeating things the half-breed had said. There was mystery enough, no doubt about that. The carved bone might be a real clue. He picked it up.

"Ivoree!" This time he was not startled.

*"Mais, oui,"* Peters answered, imitating as nearly as he could the patois of Jacquard. "She is w'at you call heem, vair nice ivoree, eh?"

The smile left Gordon's face. He clasped his hands and turned to look again at the place where the boards were torn up from the floor.

PETERS took the cylinder to the table, lit the lamp and studied the markings. It was the design on the face of the cylinder that held his attention. He got out his knife and scraped the dirt out of the lines. The bone showed whiter underneath. Next he examined the dirt he had scraped out. So Jacquard had come back to file a claim.

Peters wondered how much of this ivory there was and where Jacquard had come across it. As a curio it might be valuable. The markings around the edge evidently told the story of some forgotten race. The design on the face was a map and Jacquard or someone else had carved it quite recently. But petrified bone, even though it be of the finest tusk ivory, was useless. The silica deposit that caused its petrification had robbed it of its beauty. The texture that ivory has, had gone. Another mystery had been boiled down to plain facts. If any anthropologist wanted to go digging around in the Arctic tundra, he was welcome.

*"Mais, oui,* thees woman he is white. White, mon Pere, lak when gold she is white."

"What!" Peters swung around.

Gordon was grinning again.

"Mon Pere, he t'ink Alcide he tell." The mad missionary threw back his head in a maudlin laugh.

Peters relaxed. So ivory wasn't the whole tale after all. A woman like gold! Well, that was enough to have turned Alcide or any other mortal man a little off. But the job now at hand was to get this other poor wreck back to Fort Murray. He slipped the cylinder into the inside pocket of his parka.

IT was on the third day down to the Fort that Peters suddenly had his hands full. They had swung from the fringe of spruce that clung to the shore of the Mackenzie and were heading for the river trail when Gordon half-rolled, half sprang from the sledge. Peters threw all his weight against the geepole, yelled to Fang and brought the dog team to a halt. But not until Gordon had jumped to his feet and was tearing along over the ice hummocks toward the black water of the rapids.

The river made a roaring drop for nearly half a mile and even the icy grip of winter could not hold the turbulent water in check. The spray drove through the air like particles of pointed steel. All winter long it had been doing that until the black water was held in by a miniature range of ice mountains, sharp, jagged hummocks that made going uncertain and a fall dangerous.

The mad missionary was unmindful of the ice; that rumble of dark water fascinated him. For nearly a mile as they

followed the shore line through the spruce his eyes had never left it. Now in his mad haste he stumbled and fell. He was up again and off.

The fall had given Peters a few previous yards and he redoubled his efforts. He, too, was unmindful of the rough going.

Up one ice hummock, down and over the next, with every leap he gained. The roaring grew louder; the cut of the frozen spray blinded him.

The last hummocks were smooth as glass. Already Gordon was climbing over them. Peters went headlong then. There was no time to feel for a footing in the ice humps. He threw himself over them, fell in a heap, rolled, was up again and dived over the next hummock.

Even then he would have lost, had not Gordon paused momentarily at the top of the last ridge, fascinated by the roaring turmoil below. Peters closed on him knowing full well the almost superhuman strength insanity brings. Down they went together, thrashing back and forth at the very edge of the rapids.

Peters locked his arms around the missionary and hung on for dear life. He was nearly exhausted from the long chase over the ice; his face was grim. Either they would both go down into that seething torrent below or he would take Gordon back to Fort Murray.

THE missionary strained against his arms until he thought the muscles of his shoulders would give way. Each second, and they passed like hours, he felt Gordon's strength grow while his own diminished. Still he held on, gritted his teeth at the tearing pain in his arms and with his head tried to bore upward against the missionary's jaw. Even in his madness Gordon sensed this new move; his fingers closed on Peters' throat.

Like the tongue of some insatiable fiend the water of the rapids whirled up over the ice. The icy lash of it took Peters' breath. He gasped. That viselike grip was choking the life from him. Sight left his eyes, the leering face of the madman was no longer grinning down at him. Then came a vision and with it that intuition that has saved many a clever man in a crisis.

"Mon Pere!" he gasped. "W'at . . . you . . . t'ink . . . thees . . . woman . . . he . . ees . . . white . . . lak . . . when . . . ivoree . . . she . . ."

The cruel fingers relaxed their grip. Peters slipped from the missionary's hold, sank in an exhausted heap and lay there for several minutes unable to move. In his ears rang the noise of the torrent. He had lost. He would not take his man back to Fort Murray. But it was good just to lie there and be able to breathe.

Then he opened his eyes. There at his feet sat Gordon gazing blankly at the black water. He had sat that way on the bunk in his cabin when Peters first found him. The water no longer held a fascination for his tired brain. His whole being had gone out to Alcide Jacquard. Peters knew that it was his utterance in the patois of the little half-breed that had saved the lives of them both.

But the vision which had prompted that utterance! In that terrible moment when the world had grown dark before his eyes the golden woman had come to him. True, he had spoken the words of Jacquard—but the vision he had seen was his own. Peters, the skeptic, shook his head. It was fallacy for a man to allow his mind to run to such things.

Yet, here was Gordon sitting quietly at his feet. Back there over the ice hummocks Fangs and the dog team were waiting.

He would still get his man to Fort Murray.

## IV

IT was ten days after the struggle at the edge of the rapids that Peters mushed into Fort Murray. Ten terrible days they had been. Half a dozen times Gordon had broken away from the sledge. Half a dozen dead-in-earnest fights had Peters had on his hands to subdue the missionary, bring him back to the sledge, bundle him up against the cold and renew the journey.

Yet, when Peters made his report to Inspector Curtot it was the formal report of the Mounted. He had reached old Fort Retribution without difficulty, confirmed the rumor that Alcide Jacquard was dead, had seen the cross marking his grave, had found James Gordon in his present condition and had brought him back.

That was all. Not a word of the life and death fights at the rapids. It was one of the hardest jobs Peters had ever had in his life, but he reported it as though it were only a routine matter of the day's work.

Then he saluted, went to his quarters, turned in and slept nearly twice around the clock. When he awoke hardly a trace of the ordeal he had been through remained. His mind was clear and the only thought he had for Gordon was one of deep pity. Peters was not one to let such things dwell on his mind. He had done his duty, no man could do more.

One thing he could not shake from his mind, nor did he desire to do so, was Jacquard's hint concerning the golden woman and the vision he himself had had of her. He was still skeptical about it. It might have been nothing more than an hallucination, yet the vividness of the vision was not in any way related to any dream he had ever had. It had saved his life, he was certain of that.

In recent years there had been great discoveries in the realm of the unconscious mind—but the unexplored regions of the unconscious were vast. Peters had delved into psychology. So his thoughts ran the gamut from skepticism to belief and back again. Nothing was uncanny. Even hallucinations did not just happen. There was a reason for everything under the sun. Even golden women did not come out of thin air.

Cunning practical Alcide Jacquard was not sent to his death by a wild dream. He had found something and that petrified cylinder with its queer markings was the key. Peters went to his parka, took the cylinder from the pocket, toyed with it for a few minutes, then reached for his hat. He was going to see Inspector Curtot.

"Humph!" grunted Curtot, after he had examined the strange markings. "Not going in for archeology, Peters?"

"Maybe, maybe not," Peter answered. "The truth of the matter is that I don't think we've heard the last of Alcide Jacquard."

"Spirits, Peters?" The Inspector's eyes twinkled.

Peters laughed. "Not quite. But you know the mind of the average trapper and as for natives—" he made a sweeping gesture. "None of your trappers is ever going to believe that Jacquard died only of exposure and, in that, I'll agree with them. But—"

"So it is spirits after all!" Curtot interrupted. "Take it easy, Peters. You've had a trying trip. You've done a real job. Spring'll be along in a couple of months now. You've got a deserved leave of absence coming to you and I mean to see that you get it. I'm going down to Ottawa and you're coming along."

"But, Inspector Curtot, I'm serious. I was never more in earnest in my life."

"Which is the proper way to be. So am I and you need a rest."

Peters hesitated. When he had come to the Inspector's office there was no plan in his mind. This talk of a leave of absence had changed the color of things. Funny he hadn't thought of that.

"Could I have it now, Inspector?" he asked. "I mean the leave."

Curtot slapped his knee. "You mean will I give you permission to hunt for the spook of Alcide Jacquard. Peters, I tell you, man, you're tired out. This thing'll get you the way it seems to have gotten this poor devil of a missionary."

Peters laughed. "Really, I am serious and I think you know me well enough to put me down as the last person in the world to go off on a spook hunt. What I meant was that I agreed with the trappers. I know there is something back of Jacquard's death. I don't know what it is. I know the natives will talk. I feel that it will be bad business to let them start building superstitions. Such things once started, make mighty fine cover for a real murder. Not that they are planned that way. But the thing is in the wind. Someone is found dead and then before you get a chance to find a real clue, superstition has the whole affair so clouded you can't make head or tail or it, even if you had Sherlock Holmes with his magnifying glass and galoshes. I'm perfectly fit, I wouldn't have thought of asking for leave until you suggested it, Inspector. All I've got is the clue there on the table and something that you might call 'spirits' that has happened to me."

Inspector Curtot's face grew serious.

"When would you start?"

"Tomorrow. The dogs need another day's rest."

"Peters," Inspector Curtot extended his hand, "I wish you luck."

## V

THERE is an adage to the effect that to overcome trouble look for it. So Peters went North looking for trouble. He had two months, which was a mighty short space of time for the country he was traversing.

After the sun begins his return journey from the Southern Hemisphere is the time of all kinds and conditions of weather. It runs the scale from thaw to blizzard.

So Peters found. When he came to old Fort Retribution he left the Mackenzie and took a course that was north by west, which would lead him into the Arctic Slope range of the Rockies. That much he gained from the map on the cylinder. Jacquard had not followed the coast line but had gone into the heart of the mountains. Peters did likewise, knowing full well that his chances of hitting the little half-breed's trail were in the same category with buying tickets for a lottery.

But the lucky ticket did win, there was consolation in that. The tenth day after leaving the Mackenzie he came across the traces of a siwash camp Alcide had built. There was no sign of a trail; that had vanished weeks since. But a fire had been built and Peters was woodsman enough to know that the half-breed had built it.

He put it down as score one in his favor, pushed on and again promptly lost sight of every vestige of a sign that there was another human being in the world besides himself.

He was getting into the foot-hills now, nothing but rising ridges of snow and ice, and the rise made the going harder. Three more days of travel brought him to a blank wall and he had to retrace his steps. He struck out more to the north and pushed on, only to find his way blocked again. There was a pass through this range, for Jacquard had evidently come this way. He figured there was nothing to do but to go back over his trail and begin again. Then, quite by accident, he struck another of Alcide's camps.

There was little comfort in that with the Arctic Range towering up and never a sign of a pass that would let him through to the other side. Peters camped for the night.

MORNING brought snow and he set off with the sting of it in his face. There is an exhilarating restfulness that comes with snow. The vast expanse of bleak landscape had disappeared. Peters felt that he was in a little world again. The snow made its own horizon, a close-at-hand, friendly horizon that brought companionship.

He traveled on, swinging at an easy, tireless gait behind his dogs. The going grew rougher but he gave no heed until the exertion began to tell on him. Only then he realized that he was again going uphill. He brought his dogs to a halt.

It was the old circle, a thing he had figured out long ago in a queer way that suited his own method of thinking out things. The universe was a mighty circle; the sun had its orbit and so did the earth. Civilization was steadily marching around the earth, how many times it had gone from East to West being a matter of pure conjecture. So why shouldn't a man, once he had lost his bearings, travel in a circle? That was just what Peters had done. But it was a grim conjecture. He was lost.

He hazarded a guess at direction and pushed on again. There was a more vehement sting to the snow, it began to cut like needles of pointed steel. The wind was rising, the bitter, biting wind of the Arctic. Still he pushed on.

The trail climbed again, so he knew he was getting back into the mountains. The pace began to tell on him, breathing grew hard, a numb ache crept up from his ankles until his legs felt stiff and he trotted with an awkward, automatic gait. But the trail led upward without a halt. By dumb, blind luck he had found the pass and he intended to make the most of it. Time enough to halt when his tired limbs would take him no farther.

He put a hand to the gee-pole of the sledge and through the wind called encouragement to the dogs. Night came and still he climbed, halting finally from sheer exhaustion.

Peters awoke stiff and sore, but he broke camp and went on. Some mad, atavistic urge was driving him. Through the ache and pain of the journey he sensed a kin-

ship with the primitive. Reason told him to go back, but reason went by him like the wind. One man was dead, another was mad, reason whispered to him as it fled. Peters laughed and added inches to his stride.

"A woman like gold!"

Not in the patois of Jacquard now, but in his own clear thought, the phrase burned itself into his brain. On he went and on. One of the dogs lagged in the traces. Peters cut him loose and dumped him into the sledge. He had found the pass and he was going to get through!

His whole body ached; the pulse at his temple beat like a trip-hammer; the wind cut him like a knife. Then another dog dropped and Peters knew that meant they could not go much farther. He was so numb with cold and fatigue that it was an effort to free the fallen dog. Somehow he managed and went on again.

But he no longer urged the team. He knew a sledge dog would keep on until he went down. He had left the Post with eleven dogs. Now he had nine. If it was folly to keep mushing like a madman, then he was mad. He admitted it with a grim smile and kept going. He had found the pass. Nothing would stop him till he got through.

HE cut another dog from the traces and almost before he had started again the fourth one was down. An hour more and Peters stumbled against the sledge, lost his balance and fell. The team had stopped. Two more dogs were down and the remaining five could not budge the heavy sledge. He cut them all loose, made a clumsy pack of tent and provisions and went on alone. Then came the snow in earnest; he was heading into an Arctic blizzard.

Gradually the ache went from his legs, but with it went the relentless onward swing. He had to fight to shake off an overwhelming drowsiness. The wind lost its cutting sting and soothed rather than hurt him. Vaguely he realized that he was being lulled into the peaceful sense of security that precedes complete exhaustion. It was the sixth sense of the frontiersman that warned him then.

His only hope lay in rest. To sink down in the snow seemed like the easiest thing in the world, but even his numbed brain told him that meant death.

He stumbled and fell and as he crawled to his feet again he realized that once more he had gone in a circle. He was holding to the gee-pole of his own sledge. Blind luck had found the pass for him and the same blind luck had saved his life.

It took all his remaining strength to turn the sledge on its side, fasten his tent to it and then crawl into his sleeping bag under the shelter thus afforded.

"Blind luck," he framed the words with his lips, and fell asleep.

But was it? There came to him the vision of the golden woman even as it had come to him on the border of death at the rapids when the mad missionary had him by the throat. Peters could feel her warm breath, sense the throb of her breasts as his arms closed around her and held her fast. Then the vision passed.

As one who comes to wakefulness slowly after deep slumber, Peters gradually grew aware that he was still alive. His limbs were numb but not cold, being cramped from the close confinement of the sleeping bag and the uncomfortable tilt of the dog sledge under which he had crept from the blizzard.

His head felt strangely clear, and reflectively, as a man inured to danger and hardship places all the cards on the table, he pondered the possibilities that lay before him. He was hungry. He did not have the slightest idea how long he had been asleep. The blizzard had abated, but that told him nothing. There was no knowing how long since it had abated or whether its duration after he crawled under the sledge had been days or hours.

From where he lay, the circle of the world was marked by the curve of tent canvas above his head. Within that scant circumference his life, for some unknown number of hours, had been safe. For some other unknown number of hours it would continue safe if he remained under cover of the sledge.

In relation to that he knew exactly where he was. In the world outside he would have to take his chance like any other animal that combated Nature. But he wasn't a real animal. There were countless generations between him and the man-ancestor who could pit himself beast-like against

the trials and attacks of Nature and win out. Death, in time, was a surety if he remained where he was. It seemed equally a surety if he ventured to leave this rude but adequate shelter.

HIS dog team, split up or pack-wise, once cut free had gone back to its forebear, the wolf. The sledge-dog could do that. Many of them showed the wolf-blood in their veins. With them Nature could cope with Nature and win out. But he was a man. Too much inbreeding had robbed him of the pristine knowledge of the fundamental laws of life. The civilization his forebears had reared for him had become his master.

He could plunge into the wilds but he needed the things of civilization to keep him alive. Given nothing but a club, like one of his primitive ancestors, he would probably have starved to death in a land of plenty.

A close inspection of the radium dial of his watch informed him that it had stopped at quarter to two. Was it at night or in the day? Was it yesterday or the day before? He didn't know. He was a product of civilization and one of the toys of his heritage had failed him.

Suddenly, out of the void surrounding his makeshift shelter there came a long-drawn howl.

Peters was all action before the last note of it had gone. He might be sleepily lulled into that security which ended in the most peaceful of deaths, but so long as he had ammuntion he was not going to be torn on that terrible wrack of the North. The wolf is crueler than any device wrought even by the cunning tortures of the Spanish Inquisition.

He was out of his sleeping bag, had slipped the tent flap open and stood waiting, thumbs in belt, when the next cry, nearer than the first, curdled the still air. Its effect on him was that he gripped his belt the tighter—a great elation surged through him. That first cry had caught him unawares, but he was tense and waiting for this second one. If the first howl sent a chill through his blood the second caused it to course with redoubled energy and brought a choking catch to his throat. Here was a possibility he had not reckoned. Again the cry came, shrill but plaintive now, and with it there was a note of infinite longing.

"Fang!"

Out of the gray light of the pass the dog came. He was a gaunt spectre of the husky that had led the team from Fort Murray. But he gave vent to a full-throated bark of joy and bounded forward. Peters sprang to meet him. The Arctic void had become a living world again to them both.

## VI

IT was in looking for wood that Peters first grew aware of a peculiar warmth in the air. The sting of the wind had seemed to have lessened suddenly, but he gave it no heed. One of the phenomena of the North Country is the Chinook wind. After the fiercest of blizzards it will come down a valley. The snow vanishes before it.

So Peters went on in his search for firm sticks that would make a good fire. He was hungry. Food was more important than any caprice of the wind. He noted the change but that was all. It was Fang that made the discovery.

Peters stood stock still at the dog's howl. He heard no other sound. Then Fang howled again. Peters made off on a run in the direction from which the sound had come. Now, as he ran, he caught a subtle metallic odor. His hand went to his gun. He stopped short and listened.

Again the dog howled, this time close at hand, and the howl startled him. He crawled up out on a depression, not knowing what to expect. Before he came to the top of it he knew. There was a cleft in the side of the mountain! He could see it cutting like a great black gash into the wall of ice. It was from this cleft the strange odor issued. Fang stood before it bristling in every hair. Peters gripped his gun and went to the dog.

At first he thought it was a cave. But there was a steady current of air issuing from it. It was warmer than it had been down below. It must be a passage, but where in the world could it lead? Fang growled. Peters decided to make an investigation. With the dog following, he entered the passage.

As he proceeded down the narrow cleft

the odor grew more pungent. The metallic scent was so strong Peters could taste it. With it there was a mocking sense of the warm, heavy fragrance that spring has, the reek of warm earth. Fang, following close at his heels, gave vent to another low, rumbling growl. But that earth smell seemed to mean food. The growl died in a whimper.

"What's the matter, old fellow?" Peters' voice had much in common with the dog's whimper. There was that queer catch again at his throat. It was all like some nightmare, with a cruel subtlety that made it seem so poignantly real. His breath came in short, quick gasps. The air in the cleft was stifling. He tried in vain to still the wild beating of his heart.

It was blacker than the blackest night. His electric torch had gone long since, he remembered, as he futilely groped in his parka, searching for it. His hand came in contact with something hard. The ivory cylinder! That tracing on the face of it was a map! What he had taken for two ranges of mountains was Alcide's mark showing this cleft. He stumbled on.

PETERS could have cried for sheer joy when, feeling his way around a turn, he saw the jagged wall of the cleft standing out in bold relief not more than half a dozen yards ahead of him. There was a sullen growl from Fang.

"Quiet, boy! We've found the opening!" His voice thrilled.

The dog's growl was a warning, however, and as he climbed, Peters tried once more to subdue the wild beating of his heart. He could hear it pounding against his ribs. Again he reached for his gun. The hunger pain gripped him. He had come from death through nothing short of a miracle. Ahead of him he sensed life and he was ready to go down fighting for it.

His eyes blinked in the unaccustomed glare after the long journey through the dark. He leaned down to put a restraining hand on Fang and slipping to one knee leaned anxiously against the wall of the passage. Every nerve urged him to dash ahead to the opening that must be just around the next turn.

But the light hurt his eyes. He needed breath. Too often had such disadvantages been the means of losing a fight. So Peters knelt and waited though the wait was fraught with a mad desire to spring forward recklessly and learn what was ahead of him.

He had a firm hold of Fang when he went on again, his fingers sunk deep in the scruff of the dog's neck.

"Quiet, boy, quiet."

They made the turn. Not half a dozen paces before them the passage opened to warm earth and sky. They had left a grayish-white waste when they entered the cleft. Here at the other end of it a scrub spruce was brightly green. Again Fang's growl turned to a whimper.

Peters did not hear. He had stepped forward and now stood speechless. From the dawn of history it has been the privilege of men who dared to stand on new peaks, to look out upon new vistas with the dilated eye of the man who blazes the trail. Jacquard had been here before him but still Peters swelled with the pride and elation of discovery. So he stood and gazed his fill. Like this, he thought, Balboa might have stood on his "peak in Darien" and had his first view of the Pacific.

## VII

STANDING at the mouth of the cleft, Fang at his side with lolling tongue, Peters could not have been more surprised if he had stepped suddenly into the Garden of Eden. He forgot his fatigue for the moment and was content just to stand and gaze at what might have been a mirage.

Worn out, deluded travelers of the open spaces had been lured deeper and deeper into trackless wastes by the spell of dream cities rising up before them, or on seeming to behold the expanse of a broad lake dancing before their eyes. They had pushed on then only to have the vision fade.

As Peters stood there he felt that this was what was likely to happen now. The moment he took a downward step to the valley below it would be gone like a wraith. He had come from tundra to paradise through the cleft in the mountain. There was snow here, plenty of it, but the change from the flat, gray waste was like being born into a new world—and it was a world of his own—he had found it!

Below him lay a valley fully two miles

wide and its length was lost in the dim bluish-gray of towering cliffs that held it in on all sides. It was cold here, but not that bitter, biting cold that held sway at the other end of the long passage that burrowed its way through the mountain.

Clouds of steam rose from a lake that evidently ran the whole length of the valley. Peters had heard of the Valley of Ten Thousand Smokes. He had seen geyers and gushing torrents of boiling water, but nothing he had ever seen or heard of could compare with the valley below.

The lake was like some giant wash-tub of Nature; it was more than that. This bubbling lake, probably fed from some unknown depths, had changed the whole nature of the valley. Here above the Arctic Circle Peters stood and gazed at a Valley of Steam. There were spruce and birch growing at the foot of the cliffs and in the spaces where the snow had gone the rocks were gray with lichens.

Great drifts of snow had piled into the cliff crevices. The rising steam meeting the colder air above and attracted to the cold surfaces of the cliffs had formed huge ice-crusts that took a million different forms. It was as though a host of brooding gods looked down on the valley. At the far end a glacier crawled down the face of the cliff to meet the bubbling lake.

Here was Nature at her two extremes, ice and snow, fire and steam; for somewhere there was a seething furnace that made this giant reservoir boil. Even as he gazed he saw a huge ice block from the glacier go down into the seething water below. The spray raced upward in a thousand curves.

Man could fashion no fountain like that; nor stage such a conflict as this iron grip of ice battling with the boiling breath that came from the very bowels of the earth. Little wonder if Alcide Jacquard had gone mad before he died.

PETERS leaned back against the cliff and closed his eyes. In July, and further South, he had picked flowers at the edge of a glacier and marveled at Nature's whim. But there, when winter came, the ice was victor and the flowers vanished.

Here the battle was everlasting and there was neither victor nor vanquished. The valley was a valley of eternal youth, of eternal spring; the heights were heights of eternal age, of eternal winter.

Leaning there, eyes closed, he heard the whole valley sing, a humming, soothing drone that fell in soft cadences the way the harp of the wind plays in a forest of pines. This was the steam breaking into song as it escaped through the foaming lake from the fires down below.

It was a startled roe deer, breaking through the undergrowth that caused Peters to open his eyes and awake from his dream. Fang leaped down in full cry. He was the typical husky with a quarter strain of the wolf blood. Moreover, his stomach had shrunk. So had Peters' and he was as quick as his dog.

A shot went echoing down the cliffs. The roe gave a frightened leap, that wild spring that comes with death. Already Fang was at her throat and she came down in a quivering heap.

Peters smiled grimly as he held the smoking gun. He had shot from the hip. It was too good to be real. It was a dream, all of it. First the valley sent warmth to him. Now it sent food. All he had was his service revolver and at any other than close range the weapon would have been useless. But down below, Fang had gone wild. His bark filled the valley. So it must be real. Already Peters could smell the venison that would soon be roasting on the spit.

With a gay halloo he leaped down to the feast. It was short work to build a fire and cut up the roe. What if there had never been a report of deer being found so far North? The caribou herds lived on the tundra, thousands of them sometimes mustering in a single herd. There was an occasional musk ox. But never a deer. Their haunt was away to the South where the big timber line ended.

But Peters was too busy to begin a debate with the God of Things as they Really Are whether the copy-books agreed with them or not. He gave any thoughts he might have to the winds. Here was a glacier crawling to its death down the side of a mountain into a boiling lake. Beyond these very cliffs was the bleakest of winter. What hand had scooped out this valley and tucked into it the breath of spring? When venison is turning on a fire of coals of dry wood, a hungry man does not seek

arguments with himself on the whichness of the whatness.

Fang gnawed a fresh bone, growling the while. If Peters did not growl, he at least made a joyful noise as he buried his teeth in the toasted, juicy meat. It was done to a beautiful brown. And when the meal was finished, man and dog curled up beside the fire and slept.

PETERS grew restless in his sleep. Too much had happened to him to leave his mind wholly at ease. He passed from one troubled dream to another. Through all of them there ran the vision of the golden woman.

She was a tree that took human form only to become a tree again when he drew near. Out on the tundra he was chased by wolves. He emptied his pistol into them, but still they pursued him. His dogs gave every ounce they had, but the wolf pack closed in. Then miraculously the golden woman had come between him and the pack. Another minute and the wolf pack had completely vanished. Yet, he knew that if he approached her she would vanish, too.

The cries of the pack still echoed when he awoke with a start. There was a cold, wet muzzle at his face. Fang growled low, his eyes ablaze. The dog was crouched flat against the earth, his lips lifted in a menacing snarl that bared the long, vicious teeth.

Peters reached for his gun. He, too, kept prone to the ground and waited. He could see nothing. The air was still, not even the snap of a twig to disturb the silence of the valley, save for that singing drone that came from the lake, and the rumble in Fang's throat.

For several minutes Peters lay tense, every muscle strained to sense sight or sound of some movement in the undergrowth. Finally, he relaxed and sat up. In that moment there was a sudden, swishing whir; he felt the sting of a lash against his cheek; then he was jerked to the ground. He heard Fang rage. Man and dog, they had been caught in a great net that had dropped from nowhere.

From the undergrowth now there rang howls of derision. Then from the cover, burst the men of the valley in a howling mob. Through the meshes of the net Peters peered at them in awe. Massive men they were, clothed in skins, their great arms bare, their heavy shocks of red hair free to the wind.

But even the suddenness of the attack did not prevent Peters from making the moment one never to be forgotten, for another reason besides his awe. These men were white! It was as though a legion of Vikings had sprung forth in flesh and blood from some forgotten saga of the past. This impress on his mind was strengthened by the fact that they wore a sort of sandal, held on by leather thongs which ran criss-cross to their knees. But they were not Vikings as Peters was to learn later.

All of them carried clubs, heavy, unwieldy looking weapons that could crush a man's skull at a blow. Some had long white spears tipped with white bone. It was the bone that caught Peters' eye. His mind now went back again to the ivory cylinder. The bone of the spears was the same grayish-tinged ivory. It was petrified ivory. Every last one of these spear points were blood brothers to that queer little block of bone Jacquard had brought out of the Arctic and which Peters now had in the pocket of his parka.

Fang snarled with rage and gnashed his teeth on the meshes of the net. The giants standing around in a circle grinned.

Fang raged the more, hurtling himself against Peters and getting both of them more securely entangled in the net.

"Quiet, boy, quiet."

The dog sank to the ground at the sound of his voice, but the snarl still gave proof of his hatred for the net and this ring of men with clubs. They were only men to Fang, but a club was a club. He knew what that meant.

PETERS' voice had caused his captors to break out in a fierce, guttural jargon. They had seen the dog crouch down at the sound. They gesticulated and pointed with their clubs.

It was a time for quick thinking, Peters knew that. He felt sure they had every intention of killing him. They were neither Indians nor Eskimos.

They really did look like Norsemen out of a child's picture book. From the way they squinted at him they had never seen his like before. Or had they? What of

Alcide! The little half-breed had been in this valley and had gotten out of it alive.

Peters had found the real secret of the ivory cylinder. But whether or not he was ever to return to tell about it was not on his mind. He was thinking of the golden woman. Had his dream been true? Always in the dream she had vanished but not until she had done him a service.

Her dispersal of the wolf pack was nothing but a dream. Yet, there was that time at the edge of the rapids and again when he crawled, mayhap to die, under the tent lashed to the dog sledge.

Both times she had come to him. Both times she had seemed to save his life. He knew he never needed a friend more than he did now. Would she come to him?

Half a dozen of his captors had grouped themselves around the carcass of the roe. From the clamor they raised, Peters felt sure he must have killed an animal they held to be sacred. It might have been the only deer in the valley.

But now one of the men began jabbing and cutting with his spear at the wound in the roe's neck. That put an end to his conjecture as to the sacredness of the deer. The man using the spear as a probe gave a yell and the others gathered around him.

Through the net Peters saw that he had found the bullet and was showing it to the rest in the palm of his hand. They drew back and held what seemed to be a council.

It was annoying to be entangled so that he couldn't move; to have to lie there and hear a lot of gibberish that didn't mean a thing to him. If they had never seen a bullet before they certainly had never seen a gun.

It dawned on Peters why they had drawn back. No wonder they gazed at him in as much awe as, at first sight, he had gazed at them. They thought he had thrown the bullet! He would gain his freedom yet.

## VIII

THERE was no time now for further thought on the matter. Evidently the council had come to a decision. The jabbering ceased and the valley men gathered in a ring around him and his dog. He saw that there were several lead ropes attached to the net and at a sign from a veritable giant, who seemed to be their leader, four of the men sprang to these ropes.

The working of the net was not unlike the fish-traps bank fishermen use, and Peters, despite the helplessness of his plight, wondered at the ingenuity which had invented it. The men pulled.

He braced himself but nothing happened. Then there was a snarl from Fang.

Peters saw that the ropes the men were pulling had lifted the dog from the ground still encased in the thongs of the net.

Fang's wrath sent the valley men into spasms of mocking glee. One of them poked at the husky with the butt end of a spear. Fang's jaws closed on it and the valley men howled. Peters' blood boiled at the sight and he tore at the meshes that held him.

It was no use; he only wasted his strength and drew the thongs so tight that they cut through his clothes into his flesh. The effort brought raucous shouts from the ring. He sank back to the ground in dull anger; hate gripped him and claimed him for its own. If he had been able to reach his gun he would have emptied it into that howling mob and not cared what might happen next. They were torturing his dog and he couldn't do a thing to prevent it.

The giant who was their leader gave a yell of command and the man with the spear desisted. Now the men on the lead ropes closed in. Two others stepped forward. As if by magic the net opened and Fang rolled out of it in a raging scramble to the ground. But the last two men had slipped nooses over his legs. Now they thrust a long pole underneath the nooses and Fang, raging still, was lifted to their shoulders.

There was an expert skill about their primitive methods that made Peters marvel. He knew at once that he had no mean antagonists to contend with even if his chance for liberty should come. He saw now that two nets had dropped miraculously from nowhere in the suddenness of that first attack.

Having disposed of the dog the valley men turned their attention to him. Again the lead ropes were pulled taut. He had a sensation of flying upward. Then the net opened and he hit the ground with a thump. But the noose-throwers had been

as quick as the men on the ropes. He was hog-tied.

These men took no chances; they went about their task in deadly earnest.

A pole was slipped between his ankles and wrists, then the pole was raised and he was marched off through the undergrowth like a live pig being taken to market.

A moment before he had burned at the treatment given his dog. At least these valley men had a sense of fairness. They showed no partiality. They had not poked at him with the butt end of a spear, but that was probably because they were in a hurry. He and Fang were receiving share and share alike.

FROM somewhere ahead of him he could hear the husky's snarls and then would come wild glee from the men carrying him. They went through the undergrowth at a dog trot. There was no path that Peters could mark. Obstructions did not deter his captors; they simply plowed through the stunted spruce forest. The released limbs came zinging against the back of his head and neck with a stinging swish.

He swore and raised his head by lifting against the thongs that bound his wrists to the pole. The thongs cut and he winced at the pain, but even that was better than having a spruce limb give you a bang on the back of the neck. The man behind him, with the pole on his shoulder, grinned.

Soon they came out of the undergrowth and Peters saw that they had reached a sort of plateau. More valley men were gathered here and on a rock, with a mantle of black and white fur, and a head-dress of waving white-tipped tails, stood a giant who looked fully eight feet tal.

The waving head-dress accentuated his height and to Peters, hanging head downward and gazing upon a topsy-turvy world, the man seemed to tower up to the sky. The rock he was standing on was flat-topped, perfectly smooth and polished until it shone. In the center of it a fire burned.

So that was it. His captors were fire worshipers. The giant on the rock was high priest or shaman. Peters saw that the spear he carried was made entirely of the petrified bone, ornamented with rows of the white-tipped tails tied to it.

As the valley men came to the polished rock they stretched out their arms and bent low in obeisance to the giant with the head-dress. He saw the two men carrying Fang simply let the pole slip from their shoulders as they bent down to pay their homage.

The dog fell to the ground with the pole on top of him. He snarled his rage, but this time there were no jeers from the valley men. All eyes were on the shaman and the fire that glowed behind him.

Peters braced himself against the fall he knew was coming. It was only a drop of a couple of feet. But the ground beneath him was solid rock and he was swung from side to side as his bearers walked. The next minute they let go of the pole and he managed to fall on his side.

It had been more than a mile through the undergrowth and his temples throbbed from the rush of blood to his head. His throat was parched, his wrists and ankles were numb from the thongs that bound them.

With his elbow he managed to feel for his gun. It was still secure, just beneath his parka. If they released his bonds before the fire ceremony began he still had a chance. He would get the high-priest person first. The report of the gun was enough to cause at least a momentary panic among the valley men. He could cut Fang free and they would make a running fight of it.

There wasn't more than a chance in a thousand that he could get back to the cleft in the mountain, but once there, he could stand off a host of primitive men armed with nothing but clubs and spears. If only they untied him before their sacrifice began, they would never be able to burn him alive.

GREAT bundles of fagots were thrown up onto the altar rock and the tongues of fire rose higher and higher. From somewhere back on the edge of the crowd there began a weird and guttural intoning, a sort of savage chant. Peters' heart fell as he saw four large cross pieces lifted to the altar rock, two of them on each side of the fire.

He and Fang were to be slung over the flame on the same poles to which they were now trussed. His hope for escape vanished. His head sank to his chest, he closed

his eyes and gritted his teeth. He wasn't afraid to die. He had been in many a tight corner when death seemed inevitable. But this—the cross pieces were high—that damned medicine man seemed to be waiting until the fire should become a bed of hot coals—This wasn't death. It was . . .

Peters felt himself lifted, but did not open his eyes. He stiffened every muscle. Then he relaxed again. A man could bear more in a position of calm rest. Overcoming pain wasn't a matter of physical endurance. Muscles would pull and twitch at pain involuntarily. These strange captors of his, would they howl in derision at cries? Not if the sheer power of will could seal his lips.

The weird chanting had risen to a rumbling that was almost deafening. It was as if all the fiends of hell were singing some hellish hymn in unison. Of a sudden the wild anathema became a thousand blood-curdling shrieks. Peters was hurled headlong. He held his breath. He was going out like a man. It was striking the polished surface of the rock that brought him to a startled sense that something had happened that was not in the pre-arranged order of things. He was on the alert in an instant.

He glimpsed a fleeting flash of gold and then his hands were free. He could feel the scorching breath of the fire. All about the rock was a sea of bedlam. The men of the valley had gone mad with frenzy. They were jumping around the altar rock like maniacs, howling like fiends and waving their giant clubs and spears.

ABOVE the ungodly howls of the valley men came a piercing shriek of terror. Was there another victim? . . . He was free! Of the thousand things that surged through his brain in that brief instant the dominant one was that he was free. He had a chance to fight it out. Free! But how? There had been a fleeting flash of gold. His thongs had been cut. The piercing, terror-stricken cry! The onrushing, frenzied fiends of the valley! Peters turned and in a flash he saw just what had happened.

The golden woman had come to him! No dream vision, but a glowing vibrant creature of flesh and blood. Hers was the shriek of terror. She was the reason for the change from savage anathema to hellish rage. It was because of her the men of the valley had gone mad. It was she who had thrown herself against his captors and had severed his bonds as he fell to the altar.

Peters' hand closed on his gun and he yanked it from the holster. Then his fingers opened and the gun dropped to the polished surface of the altar. It was no mere gesture. He had dropped it intentionally. In the twinkling of an eye he had turned from death to life.

For years this moment had lain dormant within him. Passing from sleep to wakefulness he had sensed it. The locale of the scene had always been hazy in his mind. The place as he had seen it a thousand times was dark and he had thought of an empty street or a blind alley. It was the other man's life or his, just the two of them battling on the brink of Eternity. And they had no weapons but their hands. So now that uncanny understanding that had dwelt far down in his subconscious self stood revealed. And with it the golden woman of his dreams had come to life. That piercing cry was addressed to him. In the instant of a crisis a man's whole life stands before him. Peters crouched and sprang.

Before the sacrificial fire towered the medicine man. Helpless as a child against such brute strength was the woman of gold. Only a glimpse of her did Peters have as he threw himself upon the giant who held her. The glimpse told him she was the most beautiful being his eyes had ever seen. That flash of gold he sensed rather than saw when his bonds were cut was but the glint from her hair.

Her eyes, frantic, pleading eyes, as she struggled, helpless, in the hands of the priest, were like lakes of blue shot with fire, even in their fear.

Her skin was the color of dawn when the sun comes up out of the sea. The tunic of fur torn ruthlessly from her shoulders laid bare a breast of snow and coral. Glamorous, pulsating with love and life, Peters' dream of her was beggardly by comparison.

And she had set him free! All in an instant Peters had gone back centuries into the primitive. Tooth and nail were the wapons of his atavistic forebears and with tooth and nail he sprang now.

He was outweighed by fully one hundred pounds. The only advantage he had was that he made the first spring. He landed full on the giant medicine man's back, wrapped his legs about him, sunk nails and teeth in his neck and hung on with a grip of death.

He felt the golden woman slip from the giant's grasp. Just one wild pant of her breath against his face as she fell. Then he was shaken as when the wind goes through a clump of willows. He dug his nails the deeper and tore.

That vital vein in the neck was his only chance. His teeth sank through the flesh and his breath came from him in a growl. He was thrashed about and together they went down.

The giant's weight pressed back on him like a vise, crushing him to the rock. His lungs were bursting. The grip he held with his legs was broken. There was a roaring in his ears. He choked. The roaring became a cataclysm of sound. The world turned red before his eyes. It was a world of blood.

Again he could hear the men of the valley howling like fiends of hell. Again he heard the golden woman's piercing scream. His ears could bear no more. In a final explosion the world vanished in a mad red roar.

THE men of the valley were chanting. They were very far away. It was the same subtle, weird note Peters had heard at the beginning of the sacrificial fire ceremony. He could measure the cadence as it rose and fell. Presently he fancied that there were words to the chant. It was still a long way off, but there was a certain repetition of word sounds.

The chant grew louder. The repetition became more distinct, a phrasing of gutturals and vowels that he could follow but could not quite pin down. There was one word in particular. Or it might be two words. . . . There were two words. . . . He could distinguish them now. They came at the highest pitch of the chant. It was probably their name for God. It was funny he should hear the men of the valley chanting. He had died when the world turned red.

They were coming to the high note again. This time he would make it out. There it was—"Thir-Keld." The chant went on while he waited breathlessly. Again the cadence swept upward. He let himself go with it. . . . "Thir-Keld."

The swell of it grew less and less. He was getting farther and farther away from the men of the valley. There had been a nightmare of sound. He was glad to slip back into the quiet again. When the final whisper of the chant had died he felt that it had been a dream.

The thing to know was where reality ended and the dream began. There had been a blizzard. He had found a cleft through the mountain and come upon the Valley of Steam. He had been caught in a net, bound to a pole and led up a fire altar to die. And, as always in his dreams of late, the golden woman had come to save his life. He had seen her, held fast in the arms of the giant medicine man who was bent on throwing her into the flames. He remembered the touch of her hot breath against his cheek. And the medicine man? . . .

Peters opened his eyes. The medicine man lay a scant yard from him. The sight of the giant made him shudder. The features were horrible, not a human trace left about them. It was ghastly. He prayed that he might wake up. This dream of being awake, of looking upon worse than a chambers of horrors, made him shiver.

There was something black and shiny lying on the rock. His gun! By what freak of the mind had he dropped it? He reached for it, not that he expected his hand to touch it, but rather to make sure that it was all a dream. His finger came in contact with the muzzle. It was warm.

He grabbed the gun then, broke it open and examined the chamber. He had fired at the deer when he entered the valley. That was all—one shot. He saw two cartridges had been exploded! That accounted for the terrible features of the dead medicine man at his side! The gun had been fired point blank into the giant's face!

"The golden woman! Thir-Keld!" The words sprang to his lips.

It was she who had fired the shot!

But by what intuition? What had happened to her? Peters tried to get to his feet and sank back with a groan. Something had happened to one of his legs. From the feel of it he judged it was broken.

He managed to sit up and look about. There was not a living soul in sight. He was on the fire altar alone with the dead medicine man.

## IX

PAINFULLY, Peters unlaced his boot. His ankle was badly swollen but as nearly as his fingers would tell him did not seem to be broken. It had been badly wrenched and it would be several days before it would bear his weight.

He made a bandage with strips cut from his parka, relaced the boot, and with his injured leg dragging behind him crawled to the edge of the altar rock.

A whimper greeted him from below. He still had his dog! Tears came to his eyes. Fang had chewed his front feet loose but the thongs that trussed his hind legs were so twisted that he couldn't get good leeway for his jaws. Peters saw that one foot was bleeding. It was a good twelve feet to the shelf below and the steps down were cut in the rock on an angle. With his crippled leg he could never make the steps.

He gripped the edge of the rock, swung himself over, hung precariously for a moment, did his best to keep the injured leg held up at the knee and dropped.

He lit in a heap, went white at the pain and crawled to Fang. The dog went crazy and he had a hard time quieting him down so he could cut through the thongs. The injury to the dog's foot was small.

"We're a pair of cripples, old boy," Peters said to him.

Fang yelped in answer and licked his face. Suddenly the dog stiffened back and growled. Peters grasped his gun. Then out of the spruce came Thir-Keld, and on her head she wore the white-tipped tails the medicine man had worn.

For the moment Peters forgot Fang and the dog sprang forward. He yelled but Fang gave no heed. Crouched close to the ground, teeth bared, he went straight for Thir-Keld. Peters turned cold. He swallowed hard and gripped his gun.

Inch by inch Fang crouched forward. Peters cried in vain to the dog to stop. He raised his gun. The golden woman had paused. Fang's deep-throated snarl was filled with menace. The bristling arch of his neck curved upward. His teeth gleamed white. The dog had reverted to the wolf.

The sweat stood out on Peters like cold beads of ice. His whole body turned to ice. Not twenty yards away stood the golden woman of his dreams, the most beautiful being on earth. And now more than half way between crouched Fang ready to spring. He knew what that spring meant. Good God! he couldn't kill his dog! But the woman! With the muzzle of the gun resting against his shoulder Peters measured the distance.

THIR-KELD stepped forward with her hands outstretched. Her arms were bare to the shoulder, like the men of the valley. Fang sprang and Peters could feel those tearing teeth sink into the warm flesh. Quick as a flash he shot. But Fang's spring was short. His teeth snapped on empty air. He turned and sprang again and again; the menace of the spring died in midair and was short.

The golden woman laughed and stood still. Fang slowly circled about her. The snarl changed to a growl, which in turn became a whimper. Finally, he crawled bellywise until his head rested against her feet. Thir-Keld knelt and put her arms about him.

Peters saw it all through a daze. He still held the smoking gun. He had missed at twenty yards. Had that spring gone its full course he would have killed his dog. And there knelt the golden woman with her arms about Fang. He pulled himself up against the rock.

He felt faint. There was a mist before his eyes and through the mist the golden woman was running toward him. He put out his arms. In another moment they closed about her.

"Thir-Keld!"

"Man!"

Peters did not hear. He forgot the pain in his ankle. The nightmare on the rock passed. He was in a golden haze. The soft warmth and perfume of it was all about him. Always before it had been only a vision. Now he could feel the throb of her breast, and catch the warmth of the breath from her parted lips. It might all be a dream, but it was a dream come true. Reaching down he kissed her.

"Thir-Keld!"

"Man!"

HAPPY days were those spent in the Valley of Steam. With Fang at his side and Thir-Keld, the golden woman, as a guide, he explored the valley from one end to the other when his ankle was strong again.

The valley people went about their task of living, and let Peters severely alone. In the company of Thir-Keld, he followed a true explorer's bent by searching into every phenomena of this garden of Eden, and this the primitive white tribe seemed to take as the natural right of the mate of their goddess—for so they considered Thir-Keld.

One of Peters' first discoveries was that the long lake was not a lake at all, but a river that came bubbling up out of the valley at one end and lost itself in the ground at the other. He had seen hot springs before, both in cold and warm climates.

Sometimes the water bubbled up out of the ground and continued on until its course led to some above the ground stream. Other springs returned again to the bowels of the earth from which they bubbled forth. And he had discovered a hot spring that was a veritable river! But what was a boiling river, or a hundred boiling rivers, or a strange white tribe, or a hundred strange, primitive white tribes compared to the woman of gold who went by his side in the day and held him close and was held by him in the night!

And that first embrace when she had called him, "Man." He had thought nothing of it then. It came to him like a voice out of the past, a voice he had known always. It was on the day he showed her the ivory cylinder that he guessed her story.

The path led upward that day through a cave of ice in the overhanging cliffs. Peters had tried signs, had drawn pictures, but there was nothing he had said or done that could make Thir-Keld understand. Had Alcide Jacquard been in this valley? Thir-Keld shook her head and did not understand.

Then from his neglected parka he brought her the little cylinder. She looked at Peters in wondor. He saw that she knew what it was and when she pointed to the side of the cliff he resolved to find out the secret at once.

It was cold in the ice cave, bitter cold, the cold that seemed to have existed for ages. As they went along Peters sensed that frozen eyes were staring at him from behind those frozen walls. He guessed the answer to the riddle. The little cylinder was a section of a petrified tusk of a mammoth. It was probably older than the Valley of Steam. It went back to the great ice sheet in the days when the Arctic had been a country as fertile as it now was barren.

Now the cave opened out with a great room which proved his surmise was right. But the sight took his breath away. The whole place was lined with petrified tusks. And in the center there was a dais with a great seat that might have been a throne.

Two pillars were raised on either side of it like arms. As Peters gazed at them he saw that one was slightly shorter than the other. They were square but one had a round cylinder at the top. The cylinder that belonged on the other was the one he held in his hand.

Here was the ivory dream of Alcide Jacquard! Peters stepped up onto the dais and put the cylinder on the pillar. There was an ominous rumble. It seemed that the whole room would fall. He caught at Thir-Keld's arm and together they ran from the cave. The rumble grew louder. Thir-Keld crept into his arms and trembled. The rumbling ceased.

Presently she looked up at him. She had looked that way before. It was the look of a child who tries to remember, a sort of studied effort, that is, a pantomime of the process of think. Thir-Keld had looked that way on the day she had said, "Dog!"

PETERS was deeply moved. Thir-Keld had not been born in the Valley of Steam. The valley men and women were white, but they were the white off-shoot of some forgotten race. Only in color of skin and hair did they show the features of the white race. In other respects they looked like giant Asiatics. The word "man" meant nothing to the valley people. Fang was the first dog any of them had ever laid eyes upon, but Thir-Keld had said, "dog."

Now she was struggling with another word. The moment before she had been in wild alarm at the rumble in the ice cave.

She smiled now as she looked up at him.

"Thir-Keld," he whispered.

"Ship," she answered.

The face Peters looked down into was the face of a child—child and woman both. The woman did not know what a ship was, but far back the mind of the child remembered. She saw that what she said had made him glad. She smiled wistfully and snuggled against him.

"Man . . . dog . . . ship." She knew other words, for she had learned many from Peters. These three were her very own. "Man . . . dog . . . ship."

Peters heard her and didn't hear. His eye had stopped on something half-imbedded in the ice. He stooped down and caught hold of it. It was rotten and came away easily in his hand. But there was no mistaking what it was—a piece of heavy sail canvas. The whole story flashed through his mind.

The ship had broken up in the Arctic ice. Thir-Keld had probably been born on the ship. Those who had escaped over the ice with dog teams had found the cleft through the mountain and had come into the Valley of Steam. They had been attacked and killed. The way he, too, might have been killed.

The child had been saved. Her hair was like gold and most of the valley people had shocks of reddish-colored hair.

And she had grown up into a sort of tribal leadership until the day she had dared defy the medicine man to save his life. With the medicine man's death, Thir-Keld's power had become absolute.

That was the only story he could ever know. And Peters did not care. He knew that he possessed a woman beside whom Helen of Troy was a creature of clay. He had happiness, and he would never question the sources of it. He was content.

"Man . . . dog . . . ship." She was smiling up at him, all of her, womanly now, all of her vibrant, glowing.

Peters could feel her breast throbbing against his as he caught her close and held her.

"Love," he whispered.

She knew that word. "Love," she whispered and held up her red lips to be kissed.

"Little golden woman, we're going home!"

That was a new word and Thir-Keld looked up at him questioningly.

"Home?"

"Home, Thir-Keld. We—we're going!"

SPRING was in the air. He had been happy in the valley. He had always wanted to get right to the heart of things. Maybe they would come back some day. So he mused as arm in arm they went down the path.

Presently they came to a place where the path ended in a wall of rock. It hadn't been there when they went to the cave. This was the cause of the rumble that had come when they were in the cave. A great slide had carried down a huge mass of the cliff.

They turned aside to take the path on the lower level. As they passed a stunted spruce that was torn up by the roots, a sudden catch came to Peters' throat. There was a funny little crook in the spruce about four feet above the roots. It was the tree he had seen when he first came through the cleft from the other side of the mountain. They were standing on a large flat rock. Beside it showed signs of the first fire Peters had built in the valley.

The slide had closed the passage!

Peters turned and ran, motioning to Thir-Keld to wait. He came to another open place a little higher up from where he could see the opening of the passage. The cliff was now a solid wall of rock. The Valley of Steam was a world to itself.

He stood facing the closed cleft. Rigidly his hand came to the salute. Inspector Curtot would put down the name of Constable Peters, late surgeon to Mis Majesty's Own Fusileers, as "missing in line of duty while on leave."

His arm came back to his side. Down on the flat rock Thir-Keld was waiting for him.

"Home," he whispered to himself as he went down. It was a new word to him, too—for it meant now, the Valley of Steam. There he and Thir-Keld would live out the rest of their days. And—together—they would be happy.

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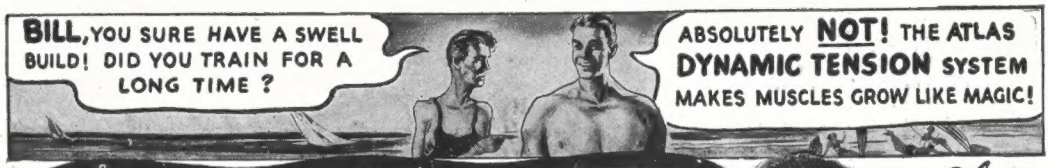
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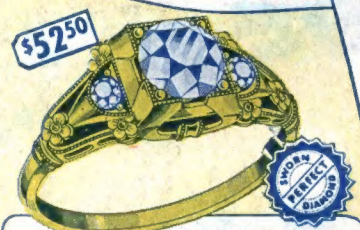


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